

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

10¢

MAY



GUNSMOKE FOR SALE

A HORN HOOKER NOVELETTE

by BART
CASSIDY

GHOST RIDER FROM POWDER RIVER

EPIC NOVEL OF THE
WILD SOUTHWEST

by WALT COBURN

ROAN • PEARSON
OVERHOLT • REPP



Zowie!

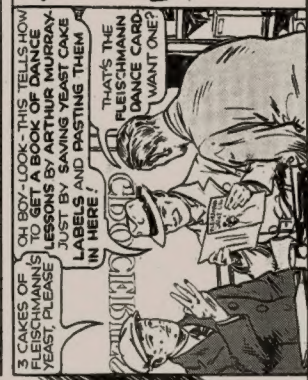
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New 6-Volt TRINDL Electric ARC WELDER

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Men, here is the hottest specialty item that has come along in years. A real honest to goodness electric arc welder that does a man size job. Built sturdily of the finest materials. Requires no mechanical knowledge—any one can use it. Every demonstration should make a sale. This new Trindl Electric Arc Welder is made possible by the invention of a low voltage carbon which gets white hot from the current of an ordinary 6 volt storage battery such as in your automobile. It only uses about 20 to 25 amperes of current which is about the same current drain as 4 head-light bulbs, yet develops about 7000 degrees of heat.

**MELTS IRON AND STEEL
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10 STORY 10¢ WESTERN MAGAZINE

VOLUME V

MAY, 1937

NUMBER 1

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

All stories in magazines bearing this seal are written especially for this publisher and have never before been printed in any form!

1—Complete Novel—1

- GHOST RIDER FROM POWDER RIVER** By Walt Coburn 10
Lew Clayton, outlawed Johnson County feudist, doubled for death on the treacherous trail to Old Mexico, when he took up ghost-guns to pay off a murder debt—and mend the broken heart of a señorita who mistook him for another man!

2—Feature Novelettes—2

- GUNSMOKE FOR SALE** By Bart Cassidy 60
The red flame of raider guns left Whiterock-town impoverished, its sheriff discredited, and Horn Hooker, the cigar peddler, without a market—a challenge to hot-lead salesmanship!
- TIN STAR TOWN-TAMER** By Peter Dawson 106
Sheriff Walt Crowe lived in coward's fear of his outlaw past—till an ambush bullet and the rising thunder of a hangnosed mob lent him courage—to die for honor!

7—Short Stories—7

- SMALL-TIME BADMAN** By John G. Pearsol 39
Five years on the owlhoot trained Jim Yeager for the day he'd pay off his lawman brother's town!
- KILLERS GO NORTH—TO DIE** By Tom Roan 48
The murder brand hounded an innocent cowboy to the Arctic Circle—where even the strongest die!
- THE DESERT'S LIVING DEAD** By Gunnison Steele 76
Manacled together, afoot in the desert, two blood-sworn enemies canceled all their debts!
- A MESSAGE TO FORT SMITH** By M. E. Considine 80
One man alone dared break the painted savages' cordon—Private Driscoll, volunteer for death!
- STAMPEDE FROM MURDER** By Miles Overholt 84
To save himself from the gallows, must Pick Harrison sacrifice the life of the girl he loved?
- GUN-WORK FOR THE WILD BUNCH** By Ed Earl Repp 92
Butch Cassidy took cards in a deal of cold-deck justice—to clear the name of Wild Bunch honor!
- YOU CAN'T SPEND GOLD IN HELL** By Kenneth P. Wood 102
The sun-whitened bones of hundreds of searchers point the way to a waiting treasure in gold!

3—Western Features—3

- THE WINNERS OF THE WEST** The Editor 4
Men who lacked the courage to face the life-and-death test found short shrift on the old frontier!
- WAIK OF THE DARK TRAILS** Line Rider 9
A youthful outcast spat his hatred over flaming muzzles. . . . Then, for a girl, he turned his guns!
- TRAIL'S END** A Department 120

Cover Painting by A. Leslie Ross

Story Illustrations by George Wert, Hamilton Greene, Monroe Eisenberg,
John Flemming Gould and Arthur Gross

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Mountain Lion Attacks Camp



Flashlight is Mightier than the Gun, says Arizona Woman



"I wakened to the ominous snarling wolf-growl of Fritz, our German police dog," writes Mrs. Corinne Jennings of San Carlos, Arizona.

"As I lay there in our tent, too petrified with terror to make a move, something brushed against the canvas wall beside me. Then I screamed and the thing made off with Fritz after it.

"My husband and I leapt from our cots and joined the chase. There wasn't a gun in camp at that time, so Buck took the flashlight.

"Following Fritz's howls of rage to a tall pine, the flashlight pointed out a huge mountain lion snarling down from the upper branches. He stopped as the light struck him and cowered in fear, finally making a desperate leap for the ground and crashing off through the underbrush like a young elephant.

"If for one was mighty thankful we had used the power of those fresh DATED 'Eveready' batteries on our visitor, in-

stead of powder and shot. While a dead mountain lion is harmless, a wounded one is murderous company.

"Out here in the wilderness batteries that 'always work' are mighty important, so you can be sure we get 'Eveready' batteries and look for that DATE-LINE.

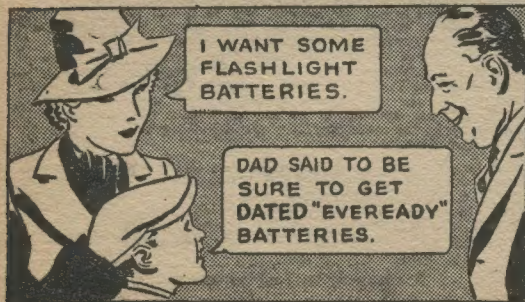
(Signed) Mrs. Corinne Jennings



"EVEREADY" BATTERIES ARE FRESH BATTERIES

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The Winners of the West

NEITHER the Ten Commandments nor the laws of the state and nation checked the course of the frontier westerner in his battle against the wilderness. Beyond the shadow of courts and church, in a savage land where the nearest settlement might be hundreds of miles distant, the pioneer of the American West was his own law. . . . And a marvel in the annals of mankind is the triumph of justice and right—in the day-by-day logbook of that vast frontier's conquest.

The power of life and death rode in the holster at his hip. Violence that our present-day statutes do not countenance was a necessity of that era. Sufficient unto the day were the standards thereof. . . .

Had the early westerners' backbones been molded of tallow, or their jaws of dough, the story of the West would be a

story of tragic defeat. Had their only weapons been tearful prayers and grandiloquent oratory, it is likely that the great plains and magnificent mountain ranges of the sunset empire would still be marked on our maps as "Indian Territory" or merely "Unknown."

By the standards of 1937, it is sometimes hard to justify the harsh code of the frontiersmen. How, we may ask, can a man who has stolen be other than a thief? How can a man who has taken a life be other than a killer?

Today we as individuals are not confronted with the choices that were commonplace in the old West: Kill or be killed; take back what has been stolen from you or accept ruin. Yet, on the frontier fifty and more years ago, those were among the axioms in the Book of Survival. And the man who had Right

(Concluded on page 6)

How do you know you can't write?

HAVE you ever tried? Have you ever attempted even the least bit of training, under competent guidance?

Or have you been sitting back, as it is so easy to do, waiting for the day to come some time when you will awaken, all of a sudden, to the discovery, "I am a writer"?

If the latter course is the one of your choosing, you probably never will write. Lawyers must be law clerks. Engineers must be draftsmen. We all know that, in our times, the egg does come before the chicken.

It is seldom that any one becomes a writer until he (or she) has been writing for some time. That is why so many authors and writers spring up out of the newspaper business. The day-to-day necessity of writing—of gathering material about which to write—develops their talent, their insight, their background and their confidence as nothing else could.

That is why the Newspaper Institute of America bases its training instruction on journalism—the training that has produced so many successful authors.

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PP-5-37

(Continued from page 4)

on his side was forced to abide by the rule or be swept into the limbo of discard.

One man's aim, let us say, was to build up his hundred-head herd to a thousand by honest means, to win security and a measure of comfort for his wife and children, soberly and sanely to pit his skill and judgment against the rigors of climate and disease and the rise and fall of the price of beef. Could he, in justice to himself and his family, meekly submit when an unscrupulous neighbor from across the river drove off his hundred-head herd? No, his obligation would be to trail those stolen cattle—and fight, perhaps even kill, to win them back. And if he lacked the courage to face that test, it was fitting and proper that he should take his loss and leave that merciless country For the West's rewards were destined only for the fearless.

Courage, coupled with loyalty, whipped the unbridled frontier into submission. And the men who accomplished that fact, along the thousand-mile line of scattered outposts, are the heroes of the most glamorous chapter in our national history. They are men whose example is a lasting memorial to valor and steadfastness and nobility.

To them, this magazine is dedicated. Their spirit breathes life into the frontier fiction that recreates the glorious deeds and lives of the early West. In the same degree that their undying example must be an inspiration for generations to come, today it is a treasure box of dramatic, colorful legend that *Ten Story Western* has undertaken to perpetuate in print.

THE EDITOR.



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15¢ **STAR
WESTERN**
THE BIG 160 PAGE MAGAZINE

Waif of the Dark Trails

THE stage bandit lay wounded in the roadway. Fascinated, Susan Lee Tabor stared from the window of the coach—at the half-savage young face, at the clenched fist, red with the blood of his riddled leg.

His blazing black eyes followed the back of the guard who had shot him. Suddenly his fist unclenched, he flopped over, grabbed up his fallen gun.

Susan Lee screamed. The guard whirled sideways. The bullet intended for his back flew wild. A rough hand grabbed the gun. The young robber choked back an outcry as a boot toe kicked viciously into his ribs.

"No! Stop it!" cried the girl, leaping from the coach. She caught the guard's arm, uplifted to strike the fallen bandit with a gun barrel.

The mine company paymaster, who had delivered that kick to the ribs, caught the guard's eye and shrugged. They trussed up the sullen desperado and shoved him into the coach, after the girl had bandaged the leg wound. It was nine miles to Beaverton, to a doctor, to the dugout jail.

Not one word did Trowbridge, the paymaster, get out of the matted-haired, wild-eyed young robber during that jouncing drive to Beaverton. Once, when a lurching of the coach threw the bound body heavily against him, he smashed a fist into the gaunt, heedless face.

Contempt she didn't know she possessed was in Susan Lee Tabor's voice as she took the paymaster's place beside the injured man. And, with her spotless lace-edged handkerchief, she wiped welling blood and grime from the outlaw's cheek. . . . There was a puzzled look on his face.

"Tell me your name." She looked up into his proud black eyes.

"Buck," he said. "Just Buck." She liked his voice. She asked no more.

After the stage reached Beaverton, it was nearly an hour before Susan Lee had found what she wanted and got back to the dugout jail. There they told her—that Buck wanted to see her, that he would answer no questions, repeating only that he wanted to see the girl from the stage coach.

"Maybe he'll tell you who he's workin' with," suggested the stage guard.

"We got to find out before we string him up," said one burly townsman.

Susan Lee said nothing. She knew they would never dare search her, a woman. Someone unbarred the door, and she entered the dank cell.

He was sitting in one corner, propped against a wall, his hands bound.

"I heard what they said," he stated calmly as she knelt beside him.

"Buck, I'm going to get you out of it," she said.

"You get out of town before dark—and stay out."

"Here's something, Buck," she whispered—and dropped in his lap the loaded revolver she had brought under her jacket. He stared in disbelief. She was working at the knots on his wrists. All his savagery was gone now.

"Tonight," said Buck, "Beavertown's goin' to be raided. You got to get out. The Cobb gang won't stop at anything. I know."

She stilled the horror in her heart. "I have a father and a little sister here," she said quietly. "There are other women in Beavertown. I can't go."

His hands free, he picked up the gun. "I can't go, either," he said.

Like fire on the prairies, the warning spread. Hanging and prisoner were forgotten. Not till months later was the truth of that stage robbery known—the horror of Buck Champe's boyhood, the bitterness toward all mankind engendered under the domination of merciless renegades.

That night a waif of the dark trails grew to manhood. When the renegade tide swept down from the hills, the defenses held. Buck saw to it that they held. With a hot-barreled Remington, he bought back his life.

"I can't go back to Cobb's gang," he said weakly as tender hands dressed his fresh wounds. The battle was over, its swift charge turned to a rout.

"No, you can't go back—ever." And the lips that said it touched his.

—LINE RIDER.

GHOST RIDER FROM POWDER RIVER

Smashing, feature-length novel of an outlaw who doubled for death.

By WALT COBURN

(Author of "Snowed In—With Death," etc.)



"Back, Stark, or I'll shoot! . . . Get outa line, Dad. Take Bonnie and clear outa here!"

THE snowstorm had blotted out the trails through the mountains. Lew Clayton, with the snow and wind at his back, had drifted with the storm, letting his horse pick its own way. Perhaps the horse would know the trail. Lew wouldn't know, because it was a stolen horse.

Lew Clayton, Mexico bound, was on the dodge, and a long way from his home range in Wyoming. This was Arizona or Mexico—he didn't know which; the

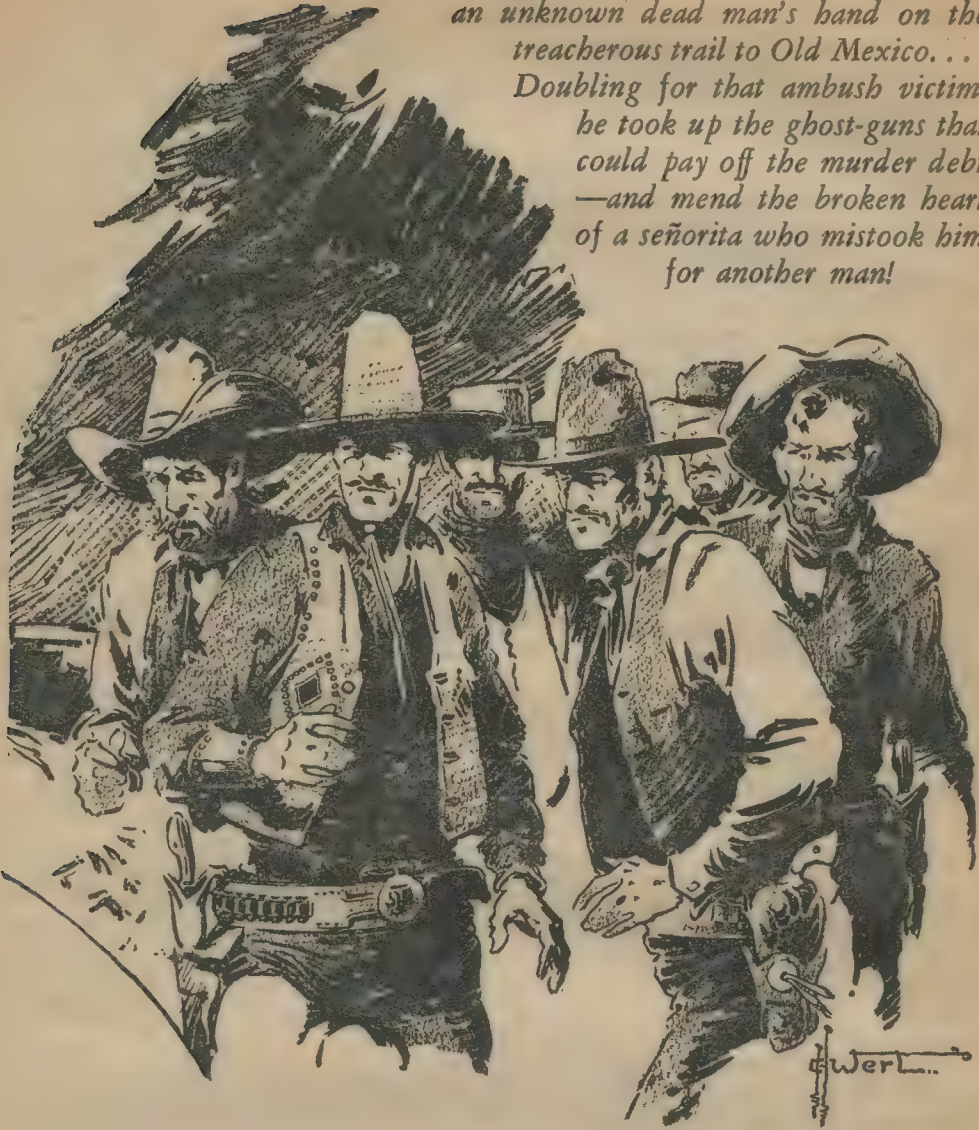
international boundary crossed these mountains somewhere.

He wasn't worrying. There was jerky tied in his slicker. There was feed for his horse. His clothes were warm enough to keep him from freezing. He had matches to light a fire when he made camp. He wasn't afraid to show the smoke of a campfire, because there was no posse on his trail now. He'd lost the man-hunters somewhere back in Colorado.

Dusk was filling the canyons, and Lew

Lew Clayton, outlawed survivor of the bloody Johnson County war, played out an unknown dead man's hand on the treacherous trail to Old Mexico. . . .

Doubling for that ambush victim, he took up the ghost-guns that could pay off the murder debt—and mend the broken heart of a señorita who mistook him for another man!



began to look around for a sheltered place to make camp for the night. He hadn't seen a sign of a ranch or cow camp, hadn't met a rider for two days. It was as if he were the only living being in this vast, broken mountain range.

The wind slackened, and the falling snow made the stillness all around him seem even more silent. It was in this vast white hush that Lew Clayton heard the sharp, echoing crack of a rifle.

Lew reined up sharply, listening, his hand on his gun. The shot sounded a lot closer than it really was. He waited for its last echo to die in the distance. He kept listening for a second shot, but none came. After a while he rode on again, alert, listening, watching on all sides, sniffing danger in the air. He tried to puzzle out a reason for the shot—and for the silence that followed it . . . He reckoned that the shot had killed some-

thing—a beef, perhaps, or a deer, or a mountain lion. Mebbysso it had taken a human life.

He watched the ears of his horse. Those twin question marks were thrown forward, erect, listening. And the horse headed in the direction from which the shot had sounded.

It was about an hour later, and the light was graying, when Lew Clayton rode up to the sprawled form of the dead man along the snow-filled trail. The victim of the shot was accounted for.

LEW dismounted after making a careful circle of the vicinity, to make certain that no bushwhacker was hidden nearby. The snow had just about obliterated the sign left by two men who had ridden away from the spot where the dead man lay.

He examined the dead man with minute care, even going through the man's pockets. The search bore little fruit, yielding only such commonplace articles as tobacco, cigarette papers, matches, and a jackknife with a broken blade and three whole sharp blades. Lew pocketed the knife and tobacco and matches.

The man had been shot in the back. Lew wasn't sure, but the shot had sounded more like a rifle than a six-shooter. The killer, Lew decided, had been hidden behind that nearby clump of boulders and junipers. The hole through the back of the dead man's leather coat was small, such as a steel-nosed .30-30 bullet might make. The bullet had made a ragged hole in the dead man's chest, where it had come out, tearing undershirt and flannel shirt and the thick buckskin jacket.

The murdered man's six-shooter was untouched in its holster. Lew unbuckled the gunbelt, with its filled cartridge loops, its worn leather holster. He examined the belt and holster curiously.

They were old, service-scarred, Mexi-

can-made. Time had been when the carved and fancily stitched leather had been the pride of its maker. By accident Lew's fingers discovered a hard, flat bit of metal in a cunningly concealed slit pocket in the lining of the belt. His weather-cracked lips puckered in a soundless whistle as he looked at the object. It was a small gold badge that bore the engraved words, "U. S. Marshal," on its surface.

Lew Clayton examined the face of the dead man. The features were uncannily familiar, but he could not place the man. He pushed back the closed lids of the man's eyes, to determine their color. They were steel gray. The dead man's hair was coal black, crisp, wavy, thick. And a carefully clipped mustache was likewise black. The blunt jaw, the short, straight nose and wide mouth were too familiar—as familiar as his own . . . That was it! The dead man so closely resembled Lew Clayton that he might have passed for his twin brother!

"That," he mused half aloud, "is what I'll look like when I'm dead. Lew Clayton, with a sheriff's bullet in his back! Whew! Gives a man the shivers, lookin' at your own dead body. Lew Clayton—dead, murdered, bushwhacked, shot in the back." He grinned faintly, but his eyes were hard, puckered to steel-colored slits.

IT TOOK Lew Clayton perhaps a quarter of an hour to make his decision. It was a decision that was typical of his danger loving cowboy's heart. Bold, reckless, daring, Lew Clayton was changing identities with the murdered man, whose name he did not know. The body would be found later by someone else—and maybe, in time, word would get back to Wyoming that Lew Clayton was dead.

The dead man's hat and clothes bore no marks of identification, save that the Stetson hat was stamped with the name of an El Paso store. It was a better hat than

Lew's, lighter in color, newer. But it was the same size. Lew swapped hats. Then he appropriated the service-worn buckskin jacket that had been hand-made, after the pattern of the brush-jumpers worn by the Southwestern cowpunchers. He changed chaps, spurs, guns and cartridge belts. He managed to scour most of the blood off the buckskin jacket with sand and snow. He'd patch it when he got time.

This job of changing clothes completed, Lew Clayton fashioned a crude grave among the boulders. He wrapped the dead man in his slicker and covered the body with the boulders and brush and loose dirt, to keep it safe from prowling animals.

It was snowing heavily and almost dark when he quit the place and rode on. Again he gave his horse free rein.

It was some time after dark when the horse brought him to a log barn and pole corral in the mountains. The nicker of his mount was answered by a horse inside the barn. Lew Clayton quit his saddle, with the dead man's white-handled six-shooter in his hand.

But no challenging voice came out of the darkness. Lew went on to the cabin, a dim blot in the night, near the barn. His cautious groping found the cabin door

yawning open. The interior of the cabin was cold. No answer came to his brusque hail. He found the stove. It was cold to his touch. He closed the door and risked a light. And he gave a grunt of surprise at the sight that met his eyes.

The interior of the cabin looked like the wreckage left by a cyclone. Scattered bedding from the bunk was strewn around. Cans and other containers had been emptied of their contents. The lids and doors of the little sheet-iron camp stove had been flung open. Flour, beans, sugar, rice, potatoes had been emptied out on the floor. The cabin had been hastily but thoroughly ransacked. Even the chinking between the logs had been ripped loose. Lew guessed that the cabin belonged to the murdered man.

He went back to the barn and stabled his horse. There were four stalls in the barn. One of them was occupied by a bay horse branded Bar N on the left shoulder. The horse had been ridden within the last few hours. On the floor were a saddle and blanket and bridle. The blanket was damp with sweat. And there was freshly dried blood on the saddle.

The two killers must have brought in the dead man's horse and cared for it. Cowpunchers would think to do that for a

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horse. They might shoot a man down in cold blood, but they'd care for his horse afterwards. They would have turned the horse loose unless they had known that somebody would come past here to care for it. Lew Clayton could expect company if he remained. And he had every intention now of staying, to see just what would happen. He watered and fed his horse, and went on to the cabin.

He salvaged coffee from the mess, and there was canned stuff that had not been bothered. Lew was careful to bar the door, cover the two windows with blankets, and stop the chinks between the logs before he started getting supper in the lantern light.

"Lew Clayton is dead," he told his reflection in the mirror as he shaved off a two weeks' black beard, trimming his mustache as the dead man had worn his. "Lew Clayton is dead and buried. But who am I?"

Shaved and fed, a cigarette between his lips, he searched the cabin for some clue to the dead man's identity. At last he discovered an empty envelope that had been thrown aside and either overlooked by the marauders or discarded as valueless. As he smoothed out the crumpled, stamped envelope and read the name and address, he got a shock that wiped the grin from his face. For the name and address on the letter were *Lew Clayton, Mesquite, Arizona.*

CHAPTER TWO

Dead Man's Partner

NOON the next day brought the sun. It also brought a visitor. From inside the barn, Lew watched the rider's approach. He saw a wiry, leathery man, with drooping, white mustache, with a skin like tough old bullhide creased with a network of lines, and a pair of the keen-

est, bluest eyes Lew had ever encountered. The man might have been fifty or eighty years old.

Dismounted, he was almost dwarfish in size, with incredibly bowed legs. His hat was shapeless, battered, sweat-marked and dirty. His brush jumper was faded, out at the elbows. His saddle-warped old leather chaps had been mended in several places, holes patched over. But his saddle and bridle and blanket were the best that money could buy, and the chestnut sorrel gelding he rode was as fine looking a cow pony as Lew Clayton had ever laid eyes on.

Lew came to the doorway of the barn, his right hand carelessly dropped on the butt of his gun. He grinned a welcome, wondering if this hard-looking, hawk-beaked, little old man was one of the killers. He felt the piercing scrutiny of those deep-set blue eyes under their bushy gray brows. The visitor broke the silence with a creaky, twanging voice.

"It ain't often, Lew, that my hunches go wrong. I'd have bet a new hat that I'd find somethin' wrong here. Two hossbackers come past my place yesterday sometime, by their sign. I take 'em to be two Rail R riders, mebbysso Cash or Tate Rand. Figgered I might come on your carcass layin' around somewhere. You ain't shot up none, Lew?"

"Not a scratch on me," grinned Lew uneasily.

That tough-looking little old customer was calling him by name—and Lew had never before laid eyes on the man. He'd take his oath on that.

"Somebody was here while I was away yesterday," Lew ventured cautiously, watching his visitor closely. "Whoever it was wrecked hell out of things."

"Hmmm, and did they find what they was huntin'?"

"Not as I know of."

"Hell, man, you'd know fer certain,

wouldn't ye, if they lifted the cache?" snapped the hawk-beaked old man testily, spitting a stream of tobacco juice on the melting snow at his feet.

Leaving his horse, he strode past Lew and into the barn. Grabbing a stable fork, he dug into a filled manger, throwing the hay aside with a furious haste. Pawing deep into the manger, he pulled out a pair of old saddlebags. He handled the bulky bags as if they were heavy. His talon-like fingers clawed at the straps of one bag, came out with a canvas sack. Opening it, he pulled out a handful of gold coins—five and ten and twenty dollar gold pieces. His tongue made clicking noises, and his eyes were twin blue lights.

"Searched the cabin, did they?" he snarled. "Damn lucky they didn't look in the manger. Keepin' this stuff here is too risky, Lew. You better let me ride herd on it. Lew, men has searched around my place a hundred times in the past twenty-thirty years, and never found a two bit piece ner an ounce of dust. More than a couple got planted fer their nosey manners. I don't fool with 'em when I ketch 'em prowlin' around my camp with a pick an' shovel. By grab, Lew, them skunks give ol' Dad Wrangel's place a wide berth. I learned 'em their manners with buckshot and bullets a long time ago. You plumb certain, Lew Clayton, that they didn't bushwhack you yesterday?"

"Do I look like I'd been shot up, Dad?" Lew took his cue from the old rascal's mention of the name Dad Wrangle.

That little hawk-beaked old devil had called Lew by his right name. And since leaving Sun Dance, Wyoming, a month ago, Lew had changed his name as often as he had changed stolen horses. He'd called himself Jones, Smith and all the colors from plain Black and White to Green, Blue and Gray. After a twisting trail of a couple of thousand miles, without once talking to or being seen by a man

who knew him, this old coot was calling him Lew Clayton with the ease and care-less familiarity of an old acquaintance. It was more than a little bewildering.

"You don't look shot up," the piratical looking old-timer was cackling. "But you're goin' to be, or I'm losin' my knack of readin' sign. I dreamt about muddy water three nights hand-runnin' and I seen a black crow yesterday. By grab, them signs never failed me yet."

He seemed disappointed, even angry, because his signs had not born fruit. Lew recalled the murdered man, and a shudder ran along his spine. . . . The old son's dreams and hunches had been right—right as hell!

THE old man fastened the buckles of the saddlebags. Lew felt the sharp, blue eyes studying him covertly.

"Put up your horse, Dad," he said, making his tone casual. "And we'll have dinner—though we'll be eatin' out of cans, mostly. They scattered the grub all over, cut open the flour and sugar sacks and broke open all the boxes. I'll start dinner while you put up your horse."

He was glad to be out of the old man's sight until he could think things out some. He had coffee started and bacon sizzling before the old man came from the barn, with the heavy saddlebags across his arm. Lew had hidden his own saddle and bridle and blanket under the haystack behind the barn and had turned loose the stolen horse he had ridden here, leaving the animal grazing with a bunch of loose horses a few miles from the little ranch.

"Ain't run outa fresh meat already, Lew?" rasped the visitor.

Lew had discovered no fresh meat around the place. "I don't know if the camp robbers left me any or not. You might take a look while I'm peelin' the spuds."

The old man gave him a sharp look,

grunted, laid the saddlebags on the bunk and went out. He was back in a few minutes with a quarter of venison wrapped in a blood-stained meat tarp.

"It was hangin' in the cooler behind the spring house, as always," he said. "How's that bad tooth of yourn comin' along?"

"Better. It's all right again," said Lew quickly.

The little old man who had called himself Dad Wrangle stayed for two hours or more. Lew felt that the old rascal was watching him covertly, suspiciously. And several of his questions Lew had to answer as best he could, hoping that he was not making any mistakes. He was vastly relieved when Dad Wrangle got ready to pull out.

"I'll take the gold with me, Lew. I'll cache it under the Painted Rock. That all right by you?"

"Suits me, Dad."

Dad Wrangle clicked his tongue. His head was lowered as he reached under the belly of his sorrel horse for the saddle cinch. All Lew could see of his face was part of the leathery jaw and the white mane that came almost to his stooped shoulders. But he knew that the old devil was grinning—grinning at something Lew couldn't understand.

He was about to mount when three or four crows, cawing harshly, lit over near the manure pile.

"Damned black omens of death!" rasped the old man. "Sling a rock at 'em, Lew. Drive 'em off."

Lew threw a rock at them and they flew away, cawing. Lew turned to see old Dad Wrangle eyeing him through narrowed eyes.

"Since when, Lew," he said, "did you commence bein' right-handed?"

A couple of years ago Lew had broken his right arm near the elbow. And for six months, before he had regained the full use of it, he'd spent hour after hour

practicing with his left—throwing rocks, shooting, roping at a post—until he'd become proficient with his left. He met old Dad Wrangle's sharp question with a slow grin. Stooping, he picked up a rock and hit a corral post with it.

"I've practiced usin' both hands," he said indifferently.

Dad Wrangle grunted and reined his horse. He rode off with the filled saddlebags. Lew heaved a sigh of relief. That left-handed business had almost trapped him. And he had a notion that the hawk-beaked, little old cowhand had meant it for a trap.

SLOWLY Lew unbuckled the belt. After carefully examining the holster and white-handled gun, he put on the belt as a left-handed man would wear it. The holster was a right-handed one. Lew, in all his years of kicking around the cow country, had seen only two or three men who carried a six-shooter with its butt forward, necessitating reaching across his own belly to get to his gun. Those two or three had been pilgrim gun-toters, clumsy. After some time of putting on the belt left-handed, with the buckle on the right side, and after shifting the holster around this way and that, he was thoroughly convinced that the dead man who had worn this white-handled gun was right-handed.

"That damned little ol' son was trickin' me. He was just tryin' to trip me up. He's tryin' to figger me out. I got him guessin' plenty. But he ain't tippin' his hand. He ain't accusin' me, outright, of anything—except that he called me by my right name. But he did that plumb natural, and his hand wasn't near his gun. He was friendly as if we was old friends, like he'd always knowed me by my right name. That's the odd part of it all. The li'l ol' devil wasn't trickin' me when he called me Lew Clayton. The dead feller's

been usin' my name. Got his mail that-away.

"But this left-handed business was a trick. And I got tripped up on that Painted Rock question . . . And I let him ride off with more gold money than I ever hope to see the rest of my natural life. If them saddlebags are loaded with gold, the Dad Wrangle feller rode off just now with a shore enough grub stake. And he left me standin' here with my jaw swingin' open like a wide gate, lookin' plumb silly."

Lew Clayton poked around, looking for anything that might give him a clue to the identity of the murdered man. It would help if Lew could find out who the gent really was—and what a man who owned a hidden law badge might be doing on this little ranch in the mountains.

The dead man's saddle was a good one, Arizona made, double-rigged, round-skirted and full-stamped, and its horn was worn with deep rope grooves. It was rigged, as was Dad Wrangle's saddle, with a breast strap, so that it would stay put without slipping while roping big stuff in the mountains. There was a running iron in a leather scabbard.

Lew had looked over the twelve head of saddle horses and two pack mules in the horse pasture down the creek. All wore the Bar N brand. They were good horses, shod and in good shape. There was every indication that this was an individually owned small ranch and not a branch camp of some big spread. It was a good layout, as near as Lew could tell. He reckoned Dad Wrangle must be a neighbor.

Dad Wrangle had spoken of Cash and Tate Rand and the Rail R outfit. Even in Wyoming Lew had heard of that outfit. Cash and Tate Rand were cousins, the two survivors of a feud clan out of Texas. Both were hard cases, and nobody but tough hands ever hired out to the Rail R.

Coming down along the outlaw trail, the nearer Lew had got to the Mexican line the more he had heard of the Rail R and the men who owned the iron. Lew had half intended hiring out to them for awhile. The law never rode much on the Rail R range, and a man on the dodge could get a job there.

Lew had seen a lot of Rail R cattle as he came through the rough country. With the Rail R stuff had been a lot of cows that wore other brands, vented or blotted out, but the big calves with them had all been in the Rail R iron. Because he was a cowpuncher and trained to remember such things, he recalled having seen some Bar N cows with Rail R calves, or with no calves at all. It made him wonder if those other stray irons he'd seen were remnant brands that had been bought out by the Rand cousins, or simply stolen cattle.

From Dad Wrangle's rambling talk, Lew Clayton had learned that there was a little cowtown called Mesquite fifteen or twenty miles distant. Lew rode down into the horse pasture, roped a likely looking bay gelding and changed horses. There would be three or four more hours of daylight. Mesquite was on the border. A trip to town beat sitting here on his hunkers, waiting to be shot at and maybe hit by a bushwhacker's bullet.

At the cabin he changed clothes. Whoever had ransacked the cabin, most likely Cash and Tate Rand or a couple of their hired killers, had not bothered to steal the dead man's clothes. There was a brand new gray flannel shirt, a pair of fancy looking California wool cowpuncher pants with the seat and inside of the legs foxed with heavy buckskin, and a light colored Stetson. The dead man, Lew reckoned, had been somewhat of a range dude. So Lew determined to play the part. Dressed in these town clothes, he hit the trail for Mesquite.

He would have bet all he had that Dad Wrangle, from some pinnacle not too far off, was watching him ride away from the ranch.

CHAPTER THREE

"Fill Your Hand!"

LEW CLAYTON took his time, riding cautiously. The sun had melted the snow in places, and the going was slushy, muddy, slippery on the slopes. He wondered if old Dad Wrangle was cold-trailing him, and the thought of it amused him.

Mostly Lew speculated on the notion of meeting Cash or Tate Rand in town. If they were the killers, they'd be due for somewhat of a shock at sight of him. And there might be some fancy gunplay. He knew that he was taking a big risk, making a fool's play. But he had got the quixotic notion of paying off the murdered man's debt. It was as if he actually had looked at his own murdered body. And the idea of avenging his own murder tickled Lew's fancy.

Lew was twenty-four years old and there was wild, hot blood in his veins. Son of a pioneer who had been killed in Wyoming's bloody Johnson County range war, he had grown up with a hard-riding, quick-triggered breed of men who worked and played hard, and measured a man by his toughness.

The end and aftermath of the Johnson County war was fresh in his heart. He had fought alongside his father and had buried his dad where that last fierce battle had taken place. And in the end Lew had been outlawed by the strong political enemies of his father.

A price had been put on Lew Clayton's head. He'd left Wyoming under gunfire, putting up a running fight against odds. He could never return to his home range, where he had been born and raised, un-

less he wanted to die with his boots on and a gun in his hand. Lew was not the only honest cowboy who had been branded as a cattle rustler and killer, and driven out of Wyoming.

The Rail R Rands had been mixed up in the Wyoming cattle war. A couple of the Rand outfit had been killed up there. They had fought on the opposite side, against Lew's father and the smaller outfits. Paid killers, they had drawn fancy gun wages up in bloody Johnson County. The Rail R Rands were tough thataway. They were feudists by nature, belonging to that hated and feared class of killers who cut notches on their guns and shot from ambush. Yesterday they had killed a man from the brush, without giving him a chance to go for his gun. It was typical of Lew Clayton that he felt himself duty bound to pick up the murdered man's dropped cards and play his hand out.

Lew whistled softly as he rode towards Mesquite, the tough little border town that was the headquarters for the Rail Rands and their tough cowhands.

Patches of snow on the pinnacles showed golden pink in the last slanting rays of the setting sun. This was cow country. Vast, majestic, it was as beautiful, with its stark, brilliant-hued desert and treeless cliffs, as was the badlands country of Wyoming, with her rolling plains and pine-clad mountains.

Then Lew was out of the mountains, following a long ridge down through the foothills. Below, in the dusk of twilight, spread the great Mexican desert. The cluster of lights down there would be the little Mexican cowtown of Mesquite. He had timed his arrival to take advantage of the black cloak of nightfall.

An hour later he rode down the wide street, which ran east and west. The street divided clusters of scattered, low-roofed, adobe houses on either side and, because it marked the border between

Mexico and the United States, it was facetiously named International Avenue. The name appeared on a bullet-pocked sign nailed to a big post in the middle of the wide street, the main and only street of Mesquite. But the natives and cowpunchers called it Burro Alley.

Lights showed in the cantinas and gambling houses, the trading store and post office. Saddled horses stood at hitch-racks. Guitar and fiddle music came from the biggest of the cantinas, marked with a sun-faded sign, "Cantina Internacional." Cowboys called the place the Bull Pen.

Lew Clayton unbuckled his chaps and left them hanging on his saddle horn, halting at the long hitchrack. In the shaft of yellow light that came from the doorway of the cantina, he read the Rail R brand on three of the other saddled horses that stood at the rack.

He had dismounted and was standing in the shadow of the horses when the roar of a gun inside the cantina halted the music and sound of voices.

A MAN came stumbling out through the swinging half-doors, a smoking six-shooter in his hand. He lurched across the wide plank sidewalk, headed for the hitchrack.

Then another man appeared in the doorway, holding a gun. As Lew watched, the man in the doorway shot twice at the back of the staggering man, dropping him

in a blood-sineared, motionless heap on the plank walk. Then the man in the doorway walked over to the prostrate, huddled form and deliberately emptied his gun into the dead body.

Lew got a good look at the killer. He was a tall, rawboned man, with roughly hewn features and pale blue eyes. His hair and mustache were dull yellow.

Then, as the tow-headed man reloaded his long barreled six-shooter with uncanny speed, men came cautiously out of the cantina. The first to come out was better dressed than the others and wore his hat at a challenging angle across his eyes. There was a gun in his hand and he walked with a swagger. His smooth-shaven, bold-featured, handsome face showed in the yellow lamplight. There was a knife scar on his jaw that made a white line across the deeply tanned skin, from the cheekbone to the corner of his square jaw. His hair was tawny, his eyes blue-gray.

"You got 'im, Tate?" He grinned faintly.

"The first shot tore his belly off. The others was just for good measure. The Rail R had the rep of bein' stingy with their lead. Eh, Cash?"

The tawny-haired, handsome cowpuncher nodded and turned to the crowd behind him.

"Might as well go back in and have a drink, boys. The show's over." He herded

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them back inside with a sweeping gesture of his gun. As they gave way, turning into the cantina, a girl pushed through and, brushing past Cash Rand, faced the scowling Tate Rand. Tate's gun was still smoking faintly, a thin wisp in the yellow light.

The girl was tall, slender, lithe. She was dressed in a tight-waisted Spanish dancing costume with close fitting bodice and flaring skirt. The dress was black, matching the blue-blackness of her sleek hair, in which was tucked a blood-red rose. Her skin was a creamy white and her eyes were dark blue. Her red lips curled back from strong, chalk-white teeth and her eyes burned with anger.

"That was murder," she said in a low, unsteady voice. "Cold-blooded murder, Tate Rand. That poor devil hadn't a dog's chance. He was drunk—and he was outnumbered ten to one. You Rail R Rands are brave men. You couldn't have gotten away with that dirty murder if Lew had been here."

"But Lew wasn't here, sweetheart," said young Cash Rand, gripping her bare arm and twisting her around. "You're plumb beautiful when you spit and show your claws, Bonnie."

He pulled her to him with a rough, swift jerk, and kissed her. As his mouth bruised her red lips, he gave a sharp outcry of pain and let her go. He grabbed his right arm above the elbow with his left hand. Blood oozed between his fingers.

The girl stood there, her red mouth smiling mirthlessly, a thin-bladed, needle-pointed dagger in her hand.

"I should have stuck it between your ribs," she said tonelessly. "I don't like being pawed, even by the dude lady killer of the Rail R Rand tribe. Keep your hands off me from now on, Cash. I won't be just playing, the next time. Take this *muy bravo* gun-throwing brother of yours

back inside. Tell Pancho to send out a couple of the boys to help me take care of the dead man. Or were you two jackals going to go through the poor devil's pockets?" Her voice was heavy with contempt.

LEW CLAYTON, hidden among the horses, grinned as the two Rands went inside.

He saw the girl standing there in the shaft of yellow light. Then she dropped on her knees beside the dead man. Lew thought he heard her sob. Then, with something of a cold shock, he saw that she was going through the dead man's pockets, her long, white, ringless fingers moving with unswerving swiftness from one pocket to the next.

The dead man's blood was on her hands as she looked at something she'd taken from the bullet-torn clothes. She dropped it down inside the tight bodice of her dress as a couple of Mexicans came out. She got to her feet, wiping her blood-soiled hands with an inadequate bit of white handkerchief.

She addressed the two men in the Mexican tongue, speaking rapidly in a low tone. They lifted the dead man and started carrying him away. The horses at the hitchrack snorted and pulled back, kicking at one another as they tried to jerk loose from the hitching rail. Their flying hoofs forced Lew into the open.

The girl saw him and gave a sharp, dry-throated cry. Fright, then joy showed on her white face. She ran to him and threw her arms around his neck.

"Lew! Lew, thank God! You're alive! They didn't kill you! Oh, Lew. I've been sick with worry. They hinted things—Cash and Tate Rand. Hold me close, Lew. I'm scared. They killed Jones. Tate somehow drew him into a fight. . . . But you must have seen it. You were behind the horses, hiding. I don't understand,

Lew. Why didn't you take a hand in the fight?"

She took her arms from around Lew's neck and looked up at him. She looked square into his eyes. Then she backed away slowly, looking at him with eyes that hardened from bewilderment to suspicion.

"You look so strange, Lew. You act strange towards me. What's wrong? Are you hurt, Lew?" she whispered in a barely audible voice.

Before he could answer, Cash Rand showed in the doorway, a filled glass in each hand.

"Let bygones be bygones, Bonnie," he was saying as he pushed through the short, swinging half-doors. "You and me—"

The words choked in his throat. Staring at Lew with wide eyes, he stood rooted in his tracks. His grip on the thin glasses tightened and they smashed in his hands.

"What ails you, Cash?" called Lew. "You look like a man that's sighted a ghost. Don't he, Bonnie?"

Lew's hand was on the white-handled gun that had belonged to the dead man, and his narrowed eyes watched Cash Rand's every move.

Lew felt the tight, quick grip of the girl's hand on his free arm. She was standing close beside him. He heard her low-pitched, forced laugh.

"What was it you were saying, Cash, about my sending for lilies to put on Lew's grave?"

Cash's face had suddenly drained of color. He forced a sickly looking grin.

"It wouldn't be quite fair," said Lew, measuring his words as he held Cash Rand with his eyes, "to kill a man that's half scared to death. That's one reason I ain't killin' you now. Another reason is that you and Tate would make a purty sight hangin' from the same tree limb. But if you're feelin' lucky, Cash, fill your

hand with a gun and I'll be plumb glad to call your bet."

Both of Cash Rand's hands had been cut a little by broken glass and were bleeding. The color was coming back into his face and the knife scar showed, a thin, white line.

"You ain't Lew Clayton," he said, his dry lips moving stiffly. "By God, Lew Clayton's dead!"

"And there ain't no Santa Claus, is there, Cash?" mocked the girl, in a throaty voice. "And the stork don't bring babies, does he, handsome? You know all the answers to the questions, don't you? Why don't you back up your convictions with a gun play, Cash? Lew is giving you an even break. That's more than any Rail R Rand ever gave a man they went gunning for."

"Call Tate out here, Bonnie," said Lew, never taking his eyes off Cash Rand. "Do it quiet-like. Cash, step out of the doorway and let a lady through. And unless you want a belly full of lead, be careful of your hands. Just oblige by steppin' to one side—and keep your hands high. Fetch Tate Rand out here, Bonnie."

He felt the girl's fingers squeeze his arm. He heard her soft whisper in his ear:

"I don't know what you are, Lew, ghost or red meat, but you're plenty aces."

She kissed him lightly on the cheek, and walked past Cash Rand and through the swinging doors with a lithe, quick step, her red-heeled slippers twinkling.

"No ladies present now, Cash. Fill your hand!" rasped Lew.

"You got the bulge on me, Clayton. I ain't committin' suicide. By all rights, you're deader than hell. I don't savvy it, Mister, and I don't want any of it. All I crave is the biggest drink I kin pour down my throat. You're wastin' time tryin' to crowd me into a fight. I know when I'm licked."

CHAPTER FOUR

Coiled Rattlesnake

TATE RAND came striding through the swinging doors, the girl at his back, his spurs jingling.

"Where are you, Cash? Bonnie said . . . Gawdamighty!"

Lew had stepped from the shadow of his horse, his gun in his hand. There was a faint grin on his face.

"Prayin' or just plain cussin', Tate?" he called easily. "We're holdin' what the spook-herders call a seance, Tate. Figgered you might want to set in on it. Cash is kinda bashful about playin'. You bein' older and tougher, mebbys you'd like some of it. You're two to my one. The only difference between tonight and yesterday is that you ain't hid in behind the rocks, and my back ain't to you. Step out of line, Bonnie. It might be that Tate will git up enough nerve to make a play for his gun."

Tate looked to either side and behind him, his head jerking in quick movements.

"And you bragged," snarled Cash from where he stood, his bleeding hands raised to the height of his wide shoulders, "that you made a bull's-eye yesterday. You played hell, Tate."

"Either make your play, you two," said Lew, his voice cracking now like a whip-lash, "or get on your horses and quit town. Move, damn you! I'm dealin'."

"I just remembered," said Cash Rand, "I left a bronc tied up in the barn at the ranch. He needs waterin'. He's your bear meat, Cousin Tate. I never did like this town life. Some night when the ghost ain't walkin' I'll be back to git another kiss, Bonnie." It's all yourn, Cousin Tate."

With a forced swagger, Cash Rand crossed the plank walk to the hitchrack. He gave Lew a long, sharp look.

"By the almighty, you don't even look like you'd lost blood, Clayton," he said as he mounted his horse.

"Goin' my way, Tate?" he grinned brazenly.

Tate Rand, big, rawboned, scowling, stalked on long, bowed legs to his horse and jerked the knot of the horsehair hackamore rope free from the hitchrack. After that first explosive exclamation, he hadn't opened his tightly pulled, lipless mouth. But his bloodshot, pale eyes had never left Lew's face.

"I don't believe in ghosts, Mister," he said now as he stepped up on his horse. "The gent that went under the name of Lew Clayton around here is dead. Whoever you are, hombre, you'd better quit this part of the cow country. I'm killin' you on sight when I cut your trail again."

Tate and Cash Rand rode away, the dust cloud kicked up by the shod hoofs of their horses covering their going.

LEW CLAYTON grinned faintly at the girl. She leaned against the adobe wall, her face hidden in the shadow. She swayed dizzily, and Lew's quick leap and his outflung arms saved her from collapsing.

"Then he—he is dead?" she whispered, and Lew felt her shudder as he held her in his arms.

"Yes, ma'am. They killed him yesterday. Bushwhacked him. I come on his—"

Lew felt her go suddenly limp in his arms. He knew she had fainted. And he knew that she had not heard his reply to her whispered question.

A white-aproned Mexican bartender came to the door. He had bushy hair, a large paunch, and a pock-marked face. There was a gun in his hand. As he caught sight of Lew's face, he shoved the gun in a holster under his armpit.

"Señor Lew! *Madre de Dios*, they

said you was dead. The señorita, she ees hort?"

"Fainted. What does a man do when a lady faints?"

"That depend on the womans, Señor Lew. My old lady, she faint one time at a *baile* because she ees squeeze too damn tight herself eento a corset-theeng she buy for two pesos she steal from me and geeve to that Izzy wagon peddler that come here all the time, ontill las' year he get keeled een Mexico by somebody I guess who like them two mules he drives on hees wagon or maybe somebody so not good-nature like me, Pancho, ees about their old womans pay two pesos por a damn fool corset-theeng. Like I tell you, my old woman faint at thees *baile*.

"I grab the bocket weeth lemonade waters, wheech some *cabron* spike planty weeth tequila, wheech the ladies don't know notheeng about and get to feel damn good about when they dreengk thees what they call lemondade waters—like my old lady ees dreengk some, when she sweat planty on account of that corset-theeng. Then she geeve the beeg gront, like the burro when the pack-ceench ees pull too tight. Kerflop, she faint een the meedle of the dance floor. Me, Pancho, I grab thees bocket of the lemonade waters weeth tequila spikes een heem, and I slap her een the face weeth the whole damn gallon maybe or maybe more—eento the face and some eento the hair.

"*Madre*, do I intentional slap thees lemonade waters weeth tequila spikes on top of her new dress, wheech she likewise also buy for three more pesos from that robber, Izzy? No. *Por Dios*, no! And I do not intentional on purpose cut the damn dress neither when I take my knife and cut loose the streengs on thees corset-theeng. The old lady, when the corset streengs go pop like the gon, she wake op, all right. And the lemonade waters spike weeth tequila make her look

like wash days. She squeal like the stock peeg and grab mé een the hair, scratch weeth the nails, keeck weeth the foots. *Santa Maria!*"

"You ain't much help, Pancho," grinned Lew as the girl, whom he had picked up in his arms, stirred, squirming a little.

Other men were showing in the doorway as the girl was lowered to her feet.

"Fainted like a real lady, didn't I?" she smiled, her lips quivering a little.

She clung tightly to Lew's arm as she stood there, recovering her balance. His left arm was around her waist, supporting her. His right hand was on his gun.

"Any more Rail R men in there that might be on the prod?" he asked.

"None that will go into action without Cash or Tate around to back their play," said the girl, smoothing her hair and putting the high Spanish comb into place. She looked up at him, her dark blue eyes searching his face.

"I still can't believe it's really you, Lew. Sounds silly, don't it? I'm like Cash Rand—spooky. Tate seemed so certain you were dead! It's all been like a hop-head's dream, anyhow—our finding each other after all the years that separated us, hardly knowing one another; then Tate and Cash coming to town last night with the story that a Rail R cowpuncher had caught you stealing cattle, and shot you. And just as I begin to really believe them, you show up and they act like they'd seen a real ghost. I don't faint easy, either. And to prove that I'm not a quitter, I'll dance for you. Come on in, Pancho, the house buys. Lew Clayton's in town!"

Lew wondered if he should kiss her, if she expected it. The nearness of her, with his arm still around her waist, was sending his blood pounding through his veins. He drew her closer and kissed her on the mouth. And he felt the warmth of her lips as she returned the kiss, her soft, bare arms around his neck.

Then she relaxed her embrace and again her eyes searched his, a strange expression in their dark blue depths.

"Come on," she said, her voice dry-throated, strained.

THEY followed the broad-backed Pancho inside.

Men at the bar greeted them with a boisterous welcome. Two or three, whom Lew reckoned were Rail R men, eyed him with cold suspicion and exchanged meaning looks. Nearly every man in the place seemed a little drunk.

Lew and the girl, Bonnie, joined the crowd at the bar. She seemed different in every way from the other dancehall girls in the cantina. The other girls, all of them Mexican or part Mexican, were laughing and drinking with the men, who pawed them clumsily, with tipsy ardor.

Bonnie drank a light white wine. Lew took whiskey. Then she left the bar and went over to the Mexican orchestra. They struck up a lively tune. Bonnie, with her skirts whirling madly, danced. And Lew was caught by the swift moving enchantment of it.

He stood with his back to the bar, his right hand near his gun. He studied the faces of the crowd, on guard, ready for trouble. He tensed as he recognized a man who unobtrusively edged his way along the bar to a vacant place beside Lew.

"Long time no see you, Lew," said the man. He was a tall, slimly built cowpuncher, not much older than Lew, with a slanting, thin-lipped mouth and a hooked nose. His eyes were black, opaque, the whites a shade yellowish and red-veined. His straight black hair was like an Indian's.

"About five years ago when I last saw you last, Stark. You sat a horse under a cottonwood limb on Powder River. Your hands was tied behind your back and there

was a rope around your neck. They were goin' to string you up for the cold-blooded murder of a little old nester who had nothin' to do with the war that was goin' on. I talked 'em into turnin' you loose and runnin' you out of the country. You was makin' dust when I last saw you, up in Wyoming. If I had just one guess a-comin', I'd say you was hired out here to the Rail R outfit, Stark—you and your guns."

"That would be guessin' close. But if I was you, I'd not be makin' fight talk, Mister. There was a feller killed yesterday at the edge of the Rail R range. He went by the name of Lew Clayton around here. He traveled under your name, and he was a dead ringer for you. I don't quite savvy what your game is, pardner, but it ain't on the level—any more than that feller that used your name was playin' an open game.

"I was onto him, but I never tipped his hand to Tate or Cash or any other man. Charley Stark is too slick an hombre to speak outa turn. I was after the big jackpot, and I wasn't cuttin' nobody in on the proceeds.

"Yesterday Cash and Tate cut down on this Alias Lew Clayton gent. They got him, no two ways about it. I was hid, and seen the whole play. I trailed 'em to the cabin, trailed 'em to town. And from the way I read the signs, they didn't cash in on the big jackpot.

"Then you show up like you'd been sent for. You're wearin' the dead gent's gun and dressed in his clothes. I happened to be outside when you run your whizzer on Tate and Cash. You even got Bonnie fooled. And he was her lover, I reckon. You got Cash plumb spooky. You got Tate thinkin' that the bad booze he's soaked up at the rate of a quart a day has mebbys et holes in his brain. But you ain't foolin' me, Lew Clayton.

"I don't know how you come to turn

up here when you did, or what cards you might be holdin' up your sleeve. But I'm declarin' Charley Stark in on the pay-off. You don't need to worry about me runnin' off at the head, because I don't talk. I'll string my bets with you, win or lose. I'll even help you whup the Rail R Rands if it comes to a tight. But I'm in on the big jackpot.

"One" word in the right direction will shore gum up your cards. And if the Bonnie lady don't run a knife in you, then that damned old Dad Wrangle will shoot the belly plumb off you. He might, anyhow, if he finds out you ain't on the level. That ol' he-wolf is more dangerous than a corral full of Rail R Rands. And he's harder to fool than a fox. He's border-raised and a Texican snake, the orneriest man that ever fetched a bunch of wet cattle outa Mexico. For-reasons of his own, he thought a hell of a lot of that mysterious gent that traveled under the name of Lew Clayton. If you and him ain't in together on this, you better line your sights on his briskit and pull the trigger. Or pay me enough and I'll do the job. What's the bounty on his wrinkled ol' hide?"

"I do my own sharp-shootin', Stark. And I don't do it from the brush. You might find that out for yourself some day."

Lew was doing his utmost to fight

down the impulse to hit the thin-lipped gun-fighter. Stark was of the lowest breed of hired gun-toter. He'd not only murder for wages, but would double-cross his employer for a higher price than he was getting. Feared, despised, hated, men of Stark's ilk drifted from one range to the next, wherever trouble was brewing, their dirty bushwhacking services for sale to the highest bidder.

"Don't go off half-cocked, Lew. I kin do you some good, alive. You won't help yourself none by killin' me—providin', of course, that you're fast enough to cut the buck. Meanwhile, I'll be ridin' the ridges without skylightin' myself for a target. I won't lose track of you. I'm cuttin' myself in on that jackpot, *pardner*." He smiled thinly, then moved on down the bar to join the other Rail R cowpunchers, who had been watching Stark and Lew, just beyond earshot.

Lew saw Stark say something to them. They grinned and filled their glasses from the bar bottle. From under the slanting brims of their hats, they watched him.

Bonnie had finished her dance and gone to a table near the rear of the place, where the yellow light of the hanging kerosene lamps was fogged with tobacco smoke. She beckoned Lew and he joined her.

"You didn't pay any attention to my dance," she said, leaning across the table.

"I was too busy," he told her, "watchin' a coiled rattlesnake."



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She nodded, smiling, and the arrival of a Mexican waiter took her eyes from Lew's face.

CHAPTER FIVE

Death-Trap Dance

LEW CLAYTON recalled a story he once had read that had to do with a shipwrecked man on a flimsy raft, afloat on shark-infested waters. The man could see the man-eating sharks in the water. He knew that if anything caused the treacherous little raft to capsize, he would be attacked by the sharks. Lew smiled faintly as he lit his cigarette, likening himself to that shipwrecked sailor.

The two Rands, Dad Wrangle, Stark—they could be just about as deadly as sharks. And this cantina girl called Bonnie might prove to be as dangerous as any of them. Señorita Bonita, the paunchy, portly, pock-marked Pancho had called her. Pancho and the waiters, the orchestra and the cantina girls all showed a marked deference and respect for this Señorita Bonita, who seemed to be the manager of the place. They took her orders, came running at her slightest signal.

She ordered her light wine and the whiskey for Lew. When the waiter had gone, she reached across the table and took Lew's hand. Her grip was warm, tight. Her blue eyes darkened to almost dusky, smoke color in the dim light.

"I hate this place . . . Drunken men! These pitiful girls with their hard eyes, their sad mouths painted with a heart-pinchng bravery to look gay—pawed by the filthy hands of these men, who treat them like cattle! I pray for the time to come when I can get away from it, when I can get on my horse and ride out where the air is clean, when I can burn these clothes that are foul with the odors of this filthy Bull Pen."

Lew nodded, waiting for her to go on.

He was afraid he might say the wrong thing. Why hadn't he gotten more information from Stark! Stark must know the answers to some of the questions he wanted to ask. Just who was this Bonnie? And who was the man who had carried a hidden U. S. Marshal's badge and used the name of Lew Clayton? What was the big jackpot Stark had mentioned. What was the secret of the gold old Dad Wrangle had carried off in saddlebags? Should he tell this girl who he really was?

He studied her in the smoke-laden lamplight. This girl had defended herself ably against Cash Rand's half-drunken advances. She had stuck a knife neatly in Cash's arm. Lew knew that if she were cornered she would puncture a man's heart with that long-bladed dagger. Her dancing, what Lew had seen of it, had been breath-taking. And now he saw that her eyes were misty with unshed tears.

"I hate it all!" Her voice was low, vibrant, and her hand tightened over his. "When will I get away from it? I'm not afraid. I'm not going soft on you. It's what I'm accustomed to, *Dios* knows. But I loathe it. When we found each other, it seemed like God had really sent you in answer to my prayers. . . . When they said you were dead it was as if God had deserted me, had played a cruel trick to punish me from the dead. It was too much of a shock, Lew. I fainted like a spineless schoolgirl. I'm not quitting on you, dear. Am I acting like a quitter? . . . Chin up! Laugh! Sing! Dance! Play the game! Forgive me for being a sissy. But tell me it won't be too long to wait."

"It won't be. Gosh, you're beautiful. I reckon you're the most beautiful girl I ever saw in my life."

Her fingers loosened their grip on his hand. She was looking at him queerly, as she had after he had kissed her.

"You said that," she stated slowly,

looking at him strangely, "as if you were saying a pretty love speech to your sweetheart. Your eyes look at me the same way."

Her face flushed under its ivory white.

THE Mexican waiter came with the drinks, breaking the awkward spell between them.

Then Dad Wrangle came across the empty dance floor on his saddle-bowed legs. He pulled a chair over to their table.

"Whiskey," he said to the waiter. "Fetch the bottle. One drink never done me no good, even as a small boy. . . . I met Cash and Tate Rand leavin' town. They acted, fer all the world, like two bulls that's been whupped outa the herd. What's been goin' on, anyhow?"

"Yesterday," grinned Lew, "they bushwhacked a man and left him for dead. Tonight they sighted the dead man's ghost—and they couldn't stand the shock. Tate done declared war on me."

"About time we come out in the open with the fightin'."

The waiter came with the whiskey, and the old cowhand took two big drinks without preamble of any sort. He smacked his lips and smoothed his drooping, ragged mustache with the back of a gnarled, brush-scabbed hand. His piercing, blue eyes looked from the girl to Lew, twinkling oddly, like blue sparks in the smoky light.

"How you two hittin' it off? As I sighted you a minute ago, I taken you fer lovers." He chuckled. The girl Bonnie's cheeks flamed red. Lew tried not to flinch under old Dad Wrangle's direct stare.

Bonnie got to her feet, with a little laugh, and moved across the board floor. The Mexican stringed orchestra struck up a quick-pulsed, native tune. The Señorita Bonita, castanets clicking, silken legs twinkling, whirled past the table, light as

black thistledown. Her dark blue eyes swept Lew's with a warm glance. Her white teeth flashed both Lew and Dad a smile as she pirouetted so near that her swirling dress brushed Lew's sleeve. Then she whirled away, leaving the intoxicating odor of perfume behind her.

"If I was forty years younger," said old Dad Wrangle, "I'd gun-whup every son on the Mexican border fer one of her kisses. I'd make the damndest play for her, by grab, that ever a man made. You and her shore made a handsome lookin' pair, a-settin' at the table, holdin' hands. If I was your age, I'd shore be swingin' a hungry loop at that purty black head of hern. You shore look like she'd done the ropin' and hog-tyin', though. I'm old and tough and hard to fool. I've knowed her since she was a yearlin'. She's never wore no man's brand."

"She'll wear mine if there's any way on earth to make her want to," said Lew, his blood racing through his veins like liquid fire, his eyes watching her hungrily. He wasn't aware of speaking his thoughts aloud.

Old Dad Wrangle's grunt brought him back to earth with a jerk. "By grab!" the old cowpuncher said, his eyes watching Lew.

As Dad Wrangle filled his glass and gulped down a stiff drink, Lew knew that he had somehow blundered into a trap. That cunning old devil had tripped him up again.

Lew was hot with smoldering resentment. He'd blurted out the fact that he had fallen hard for Bonnie. Hell, was it a crime to fall a victim to her beauty? What was so damned odd about that, anyhow? Any man in the crowded cantina might have said what Lew had just unconsciously admitted aloud.

"No law along the border against a man's wanting her, is there?" he demanded hotly.

"No. Hell, no, son!" Dad Wrangle poured himself another drink, without taking his eyes from Lew's. "Only it struck me, Lew," he drawled, "as a sort of odd remark fer a man to make regardin' his sister."

It was as if the old codger had slapped him across the face with a wet dishrag. Lew's face felt hot and his tongue was like cotton in his mouth.

THEN Bonnie was back at the table.

She dropped into her chair, breathing fast. Old Dad Wrangle grinned oddly at Lew, and downed his drink with a gulp that made his Adam's apple bob up and down like a cork in his leathery throat.

As the cantina filled with applause, Bonnie frowned in a half-playful, half-serious manner.

"It is a good thing that the rest of my audience is more appreciative than you. In the theatre such touching response as yours, Lew, is known as 'sitting on your hands'."

"It was shore purty," stammered Lew uncomfortably, feeling the mocking scrutiny of Dad Wrangle's eyes, now hidden under the shadow of his battered, old hat.

"And it hurts you to have me dancing for a crowd of drunken, sweat-smelling border renegades. Isn't that it?" She smiled quickly, and her hand covered his as he started to reach for Dad Wrangle's bottle.

"Yes," gulped Lew, and held her hand in his, defiance in the faint grin he gave Dad Wrangle. "If I had my way, I'd take you out of this stinkin' hole right now. You're the only thing in here that's clean and decent—and beautiful." Lew's voice was a little tense. He meant what he was saying. This cantina girl had somehow taken his heart and squeezed it in her white, ringless hands when she took hold of his hand.

"Why, Lew! What a compliment to

pay me! And after that Sunday school lecture you gave me the last time you were here. Remember?"

"Yeah!" Dad Wrangle cut in drily. "Remember?" He took the bottle, and poured himself another drink.

Lew reckoned that Dad Wrangle was crowding things to a showdown. Dad was keeping his gun hand free, doing his drinking with his left. That old renegade was dangerous as a coiled rattler.

Bonnie was beginning to suspect that something was wrong. She was watching them closely.

"If you two are going to lock horns, I'll leave you flat and join the Rail R men. They seem to be gathering at the bar. A few minutes ago there were four. I can count six now. With Cash and Tate not here, they'll be taking orders from Stark. I saw him talking to you, Lew. I thought you said you'd told him to keep away from you."

"Yeah!" said Dad Wrangle. "What did the Rail R top-hand have to say, anyhow?"

"For one thing, he said you was the toughest renegade that ever went unhung, or somethin' of the sort."

"Hit the nail on the head, eh? Well, I ain't denyin' a thing. When a man gits in my road, I shoot first and ask my questions afterwards." He grinned meaningly, his hand near his gun.

"You might be makin' a mistake, doin' that."

"After I left you at the Bar N ranch," said the old cowpuncher, sort of crouching in his chair, "I taken a little pasear over to'rds the Rail R boundary. I come onto a couple of coyotes sorta sniffin' around a pile of rocks a ways off the trail. I done a little prospectin' and find a dead man under them rocks. What would you make of that, now?"

This was the showdown. Bonnie sat rigid, not understanding just what the

talk was leading to, but sensing danger. Her hand seemed to grow moist and cold in Lew's, there on the table. It was Lew's gun-hand she held so tightly, and he wondered if she was purposely giving old Dad Wrangle the breaks in case a gun play started. The old rascal's eyes were cold now, narrowed to puckered slits.

CHAPTER SIX

Partners Against the Pack

THE pock-marked Pancho appeared, a letter in his hand, a smile on his sinister looking face. He said something to Lew in his native tongue.

Lew, who could neither speak nor understand the Mexican tongue, looked at the white-aproned saloonman a little blankly.

"Talk American," said Lew. "What are you tryin' to tell me?"

Bonnie's hand let go of his as if she'd been holding a snake and was suddenly aware of it for the first time. Her eyes widened, staring at him.

"Take the letter, Bonnie," rasped old Dad Wrangle, "and read it. And keep out of line. That grave I found yesterday held your brother's dead body. Tate Rand didn't miss. I don't know who this smart son is that's showed up, fer all the world like a ghost, but I reckon I know his game. Pancho, you and your men watch Stark and them Rail R snakes. Bonnie, step back outa line and read what that letter says. Read it out loud. It might give us a hint about this feller's brand."

Pancho stared hard at Lew, crossed himself furtively and hastened back to the bar.

"Don't go off half-cocked, Dad," said Bonnie, sliding back her chair and rising. "If you're not my brother Bill, Mister, who are you?"

"I'm Lew Clayton, lady. I was branded with that name when I was born. And

I'd shore like to know howcome your brother was usin' my name around here. I could ask a few questions myself, before I unlimber a gun, old-timer," he said, looking at Dad Wrangle.

When the girl had let go Lew's gun-hand, he'd edged it from the table—and now it rested on the white handle of the six-shooter he had taken from the dead man. The feel of the gun made him bold, reckless.

"And lady, what I said about wantin' to take you out of this Bull Pen still goes."

"Is that a love proposal, cowboy?"

"It might be, ma'am," grinned Lew, watching Dad Wrangle's scowling face. "Though this old hunk of jerky shore makes a potent chaperon."

"You know," said the girl, "it might not be a hard job falling in love with you. Yo're the exact image of my long lost brother that I found again her at Mesquite. We've already kissed one another, so that much of the preliminary work is over with—"

"Quit this damned nonsense," rasped old Dad Wrangle. "Read that letter to me, Bonnie. This hombre should have learned Mex before he come gumshoein' around on this job. You shore have been clumsy, Lew Clayton. You made your first big mistake when you stood by and let me take that gold right from under your nose. And I was plumb certain you was phony as a lead dollar when I said I'd cache it at Painted Rock. You poor idiot, Painted Rock was where the Rail R Rands had the stuff hid.

"Bonnie, you let this smooth-talkin' snake fool you plenty. Shows you ain't so damned bright as you might be. Now step back outa line and read off what that letter says. It ain't the first letter that's come here for your brother under the name of Lew Clayton. I'm kinda curious to see who's been writin' him. Read it

to me and don't make no mistakes. I'll keep my eye on Mister Lew Clayton."

Lew didn't dare take his eyes from Dad Wrangle. He heard the girl open the letter. He heard her voice as she began reading in a slow, steady tone.

"Not satisfied with your progress at Mesquite. Sending man to help you. He will contact you under the name of Bill Jones. Watch Stark. Arrest Dad Wrangle and the girl known as Bonnie, who is supposed to be his daughter. Both are dangerous. Use utmost caution. Trust Jones. He is one of the ablest men in the service."

Bonnie finished reading, frowning puzzledly, looking from Lew to Dad Wrangle. With a muttered oath Dad Wrangle cut the silence that followed.

"It don't take no college perfesser to figger it that you're the detective who was to use the name Bill Jones," the old rascal snarled in a harsh, low-voiced monotone, his cold blue eyes now the eyes of a killer at bay.

"Quit it, Dad!" snapped the girl. "Jones is dead. Tate Rand killed him not an hour ago. Jumped him when he asked Pancho where he could locate a man named Lew Clayton. Tate forced the fight and killed him. I took this off his dead body."

She tossed a metal badge on the table between the two men. Lew saw Dad Wrangle's eyes go toward the badge. It was the split-second chance for which Lew had been hoping.

LEW kicked with all his strength, smashing the round-topped, green-covered table over on top of Dad Wrangle. And he leaped after it. He was on top of the old gun-toter, who had been knocked over in his chair, the table edge striking him squarely across the eyes as he sat, crouched low.

Lew grabbed the old cowhand's gun

and backed against the wall. He had a six-shooter in each hand as old Dad Wrangle, dazed, with blood oozing from his cut forehead, scrambled from beneath the wreckage.

But it was Stark and the Rail R men who were covered by Lew's two guns. They had started forward at the crash of the upset table.

"Back, Stark, or I'll shoot! Bonnie, get out of here before you get hurt. Hell's goin' to pop. Get outa line, Dad. Take Bonnie and clear outa here!"

"Here, Dad," Lew heard Bonnie's voice off to one side. He dared not look at her. "Here's my gun. Don't let Lew fight the whole Rail R outfit alone. You drunken old idiot!"

"Keep your pop-gun, Bonnie," grated old Dad Wrangle's voice.

Out of the tail of his eye, Lew saw the little old renegade standing alongside him, holding out his hand.

"Gimme my hawg-laig, Lew. She's right. I'm a drunk idiot. I don't savvy your game, but I'm sidin' you if it's ag'in' the Rail R outfit. Clear the gals outa here, Bonnie."

But the cantina girls were already scurrying like frightened quail out the back door. In a moment they were gone.

Lew handed Dad Wrangle his long-barreled, old, cedar-handled six-shooter. He heard the old renegade grunt his thanks.

"One thing, Lew," growled Dad, "before the wreck is on. Am I sidin' a damned badge-toter?"

"I got a badge that was hid in the belt I taken off Bonnie's dead brother. Only one I ever had on me or ever hope to have. I'm ridin' the outlaw trail."

Lew heard the old rascal chuckle. "Me and you and Bonnie. And we'll keep the booty you seen in them saddlebags." He raised his voice to a rasping, raucous shout: "Stark, one move outa you snakes,

and we'll blow the bellies off you and your whole damned Rail R pack of mangy wolves. Pancho, you and your *hombrecitos* ride herd on 'em. Me and Bonnie and Lew is pullin' stakes fer keeps. The Bull Pen is all yourn. Adios, amigo!"

"Adios, Señor Dad. *Gracias* planty por thees place. Adios, Señorita Bonita. Or ees the Señor Dad making the monkey-joke out of me? You are making the get-away from thees so profitable Cantina Internacional, where you geeve me the boss-job?"

"Quitting the Bull Pen on Burro Alley for keeps, Pancho," Lew heard Bonnie call from the direction of the rear door. "It's yours—and good luck! It's all yours, even the money in the cash box. Good luck, amigo. Tell the Señora to name the new baby for me—unless it's a boy. Then the name will be Lew, no?"

"Por your brother that ees dead and have the ghost?"

"For the man I'm going to marry. Adios, Pancho. This way, Dad. Don't trip over the furniture, Lew. Let's get going."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mexico Ahead!

LEW and Dad Wrangle, their guns in their hands, backed to the rear door. Bonnie, gripping a pearl-handled, silver-mounted .38 six-shooter, was holding the door open.

Stark and the half dozen Rail R men stood motionless under the threatening guns of Pancho and a dozen or more Mexicans armed with six-shooters and sawed-off shotguns.

"You ain't gittin' away with this, Lew Clayton! Tate and Cash will git you along the trail!" called Stark as Lew backed out the door, where Bonnie waited, a smile on her red mouth.

Her hand squeezed his left arm in a quick, hard grip. He grinned as she whispered, almost in his ear: "It may not be leap year, Lew, but I took a chance."

"It's kinda sudden," Lew grinned, without taking his eyes from Stark. "But recallin' that you pack a knife, I can't do much about it except give in. Know ary preachers in Mexico?"

"Pancho's brother's a padre. When he ties his knots, only a knife or a gun can undo 'em."

"Tied hard and fast, like they should be—no slippin' the dallies, eh? Come on, Dad. Don't keep us young folks waitin'."

"Git the horses around here, you and Bonnie. I'll guard the rear door. Hurry up. Quit blattin' nonsense."

Lew got Dad Wrangle's horse and his own at the hitchrack, while Bonnie led a black gelding, already saddled, from a low-roofed barn behind the cantina. Lew delayed long enough to cut loose every horse tied at the hitchrack. Mounted, leading Dad Wrangle's horse, he met Bonnie. They reached the door as the old renegade backed out, his gun in his hand.

From inside came the roar of a gun. The six-shooter in Dad Wrangle's hand belched fire. Then the din of gunfire filled the cantina. Old Dad whirled and ran to his horse, swinging into the saddle with a cat-like swiftness that would have done credit to a much younger man.

"Stark got a itchy trigger finger," he rasped as the three of them spurred to a run down the deserted street. "I got 'im. It was a bull's eye, square between the horns." He chuckled. "We'll kill the Rands where we find 'em."

"Whichaway?" asked Lew, as they headed south and were clear of town.

"Mexico, son." He twisted sideways in his saddle and slapped the bulging saddlebags, which were visible when he pulled aside the tail of the yellow slicker tied

behind his saddle cante. "The gold that's cost more than one man his life, Lew. Gold and packages of banknotes that come from a few bank robberies and stage hold-up jobs and mebbys a train robbery er two. This-here's the gold that was stole by the Rail R Rands and the outlaws that rode with 'em.

"The Rands used cattle raisin' and two-bit rustlin' fer a blind to cover their real trade as road-agents and bank robbers. And they cached their loot at a big old rock along the outlaw trail that was covered with old Injun carvin's. Painted Rock, it's called. I'd located it and was liftin' their cache when a feller covered me from the brush. He'd been hid there fer days and nights, waitin' to see who'd call fer that loot. The feller had me dead to rights. That feller turned out to be a law officer travelin' as a renegade and livin' on the Bar N ranch at the edge of the Rail R range. He'd bought it a few weeks ago and give his name around here as Lew Clayton."

"**W**HERE'D he get my name?" Lew questioned, as they rode three abreast at a long trot.

"Some feller had told him he looked enough like a Wyoming cowpuncher named Lew Clayton to be his twin brother. So he taken that name. His real name was Bill Barnard, he tells me as he puts handcuffs on me and takes me to Mesquite. And, at first, I figgered he was lyin'—because fer fifteen years I'd been huntin' a young feller named Bill Barnard.

"I asked him if he was, by ary chance, the ten-twelve year old Billy that was orphaned in Mexico when Mexican bandits killed his mother and daddy and run off with his young sister. The boy Billy had been sent to El Paso to school and was there when his folks was killed and his young sister carried off.

"He says he's that same boy. And I tells him I'll make a dicker with him. If he'll set me free and not take me back to Texas on a few old charges the law holds, ag'in' me there, I'll lead him to his lost sister. We shake on that when he unlocks my handcuffs. And I take him to the Cantina Internacional, where Bonnie is. He'd seen her, even talked to her, and never guessed she was his lost sister."

"Don't let Dad make you believe he's all tough, Lew," cut in Bonnie quickly as she rode between them. "He knew my dad. And he took the trail of the renegade Mexicans who'd stolen me. He and a couple or six other cowpunchers hiding out in that part of Mexico. They caught 'em and wiped 'em out, to the last murdering greaser. And took me with them. They couldn't return to Texas with me, because the Rangers were on their trail. Dad Wrangle fetched me to New Mexico and left me with some people at Santa Fe. Gave them money to care for me. They put me in a convent as an orphan—and skipped with the money.

"Three years ago I was adopted by a couple. I was glad to get away from the convent and the discipline. The woman was Mexican, the man a Texan, a gambler, though the mother superior at the convent didn't know. The woman taught me to dance. They put me to work in their cantina at Mesquite. They wanted to sell me, understand, like they'd sell a good looking filly. I cut the woman with her own dagger. And a cowpuncher, who was in Mesquite with some of his friends, shot the Texan . . . Do you believe in God, Lew? That cowpuncher was Dad Wrangle.

"Dad and the other cowpunchers took over the cantina. They ran off the Mexican woman and gave the place to me. And they gave the Rail R Rands and every other wild cowpuncher their orders

not to lay a hand on me. I owned the Cantina Internacional. Dad got Pancho and his Mexican friends to help me run it. And I almost liked the job—until I met my brother, and he promised to take me away when he'd gotten enough proof against the Rail R Rands. That's the story. I don't know why we're telling you about it, except—"

"Except that I'm goin' to marry you if you'll let me, and we're all three sort of pardners from now on. Ain't that it, Dad?"

"That's it, son. I reckon he'll do to take along, eh, Bonnie?"

"Reckon I'll do?" asked Lew.

"Yes." The girl was not smiling. Her eyes looked misty in the moonlight.

Lew leaned from his saddle and kissed her. Old Dad Wrangle tickled his horse with the spurs and rode on ahead at a long trot.

They did not notice that he gripped the saddlehorn with his left hand, and that he rode queerly, a little sideways in his saddle.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Battle To the Death

LEW CLAYTON and Bonnie that night were too intoxicated with love to think clearly about anything. They hadn't noticed that old Dad Wrangle was hurt. And they had wiped Cash and Tate Rand and the Rail R outfit completely from their minds. It was as if nothing had ever been wrong. Their whole life, their every thought was for the present moment and the future's rosy dreams.

Lew knew better than to discount the two Rand cousins. Only he just didn't have room in his thoughts for them. He was Lew Clayton from Powder River and he was in love with a girl he'd never seen or heard of until a few hours ago. She

was the sort of girl made to order for a wild, young cowboy, outlawed from his home range, with a price on his head, who had only his horse and his saddle rope and his gun to claim for wealth. There was only one girl on earth who would side a wild cowboy like that. Lew had found her.

He'd fight to keep her. He'd fight when there was anything to fight against, be it danger or hardships or whatever fate threw as a barrier across their trail. And Bonnie would always ride alongside him, their stirrups touching, fighting at his side, loving him. That's what they had found under the stars of Old Mexico when the moon looked down.

Old Dad Wrangle and his horse were a moving shadow on the trail ahead. Dad, riding almost a hundred yards in the lead, topped a slight rise and dropped below the skyline into the dry wash beyond.

A sudden crash of shots jerked Lew and Bonnie out of their dreams.

"Stay back and duck into cover!" Lew called over his shoulder as he spurred his horse hard, jerking his gun.

As Lew topped the rise, a bullet tore at his hat crown. Lew shot at the flame of the gun in the brush-spotted wash below. And he rode down on Cash Rand as the latter fired a second time. But in that split second Lew's horse, lunging down the slope, had tossed its head. The bullet caught the horse in the head, and the animal went down, dead.

Lew was thrown headlong, catapulted from the saddle. The racing speed of the horse gave his body a terrific impetus. He must have been thrown twenty or thirty feet through the air—to land with a crash on top of the crouched Cash Rand.

It was a freak accident. And it happened so suddenly that neither man, for a mo-

ment, could think swiftly enough to take advantage of their tangled position.

Then they were fighting to the death at close quarters, clubbing with their gun barrels. Cash Rand's gun thudded down across the back of Lew's neck, and the hammer exploded the cartridge under it. The powder burned Lew's hair and the bullet nicked his scalp. Lew thought he was shot in the head. And in a vague, confused way, he wondered why he was still alive and able to fight.

He was battling with all the savage, killing instinct of a wolf. All the training he'd had since boyhood, the training of the wild, war-torn cow country, the training a man must have to survive, was with Lew as he clubbed and struck and tried to shoot this man he fought. He'd caught a swift glance of the man's face. It was Cash Rand, he knew. He'd make the dirty son pay for the kiss he'd taken from Bonnie! He was going to kill Cash Rand. . . .

They rolled over in the mesquite and catclaw brush. It ripped their faces and clothes.

Dimly in that confusion, Lew heard shooting. Once he saw Bonnie standing somewhere. She still wore her black, dancing costume. The blood-red artificial rose was still in her jet black hair. And she had that fancy, silver-mounted gun in her hand. Then Cash Rand's thumb was gouging at Lew's eyes. A stabbing, red-hot pain shot through his eyes. And he fought like a madman, gritting his teeth.

Cash had bitten a nick out of his ear. He had jerked a knee into Lew's groin; the pain of it, along with the stabbing pain of his gouged eye, was terrific. It made him sick. He wanted to vomit from the pain. Piercing, hot needles were in his eyes.

There was the roar and blinding flash of a gun in his face. Powder burned his jaw.

And in that red blindness that enveloped him he could see nothing. But he knew that Cash Rand was no longer fighting. He felt the flesh of the man's corded neck in his grip. And he pounded at the head he could not see with the barrel of his gun.

Then Bonnie's voice, insistent, unsteady, penetrated that red smear that blinded him and made him dizzy and nauseated:

"Don't hit him any more, Lew! He's dead! He's dead, Lew! You got him! Don't! Oh, God, don't pound that poor face any more!"

LEW got to his feet, groping blindly, Bonnie's shaking hands guiding him. Her voice was unsteady as she sat him down on the ground.

"Where's Dad?" he asked. "Are you hurt, Bonnie? I can't see anything because there's blood in my eyes. Are you hurt?"

"No, Lew. Sit still. Don't move around. I'll be back in a minute with some water. There's a canteen on my saddle."

"Where's Dad?" Lew asked, holding an unsteady hand against his eyes, trying to wipe away the red smear that blinded him. "Did they get him?"

"Dad's shot up badly, Lew. I have to go to him. He got Tate Rand. Dad's calling now."

Lew could hear Dad's rasping voice: "Damn it, quit that lollygaggin' love talk, you two, and come here. I got a few words to say before I cash in my chips. Did you look in Tate's pockets fer a bottle, Bonnie? Mebbyso there's one wrapped in his slicker. Damn his ornery heart, it'd be like him to bust his last bottle afore he died. Fetch Lew here."

"Was there just Cash and Tate, Bonnie?" asked Lew. "We got 'em both?"

"Yes. We got 'em both, Lew. There was just the two of 'em."

"Take me to where Dad is. Dad, you ain't goin' to die. You can't quit us now."

Bonnie was fighting back the sobs that choked in her throat as she took Lew by the arm and piloted him to where old Dad reclined, with his back against a rock. Lew couldn't see him. Dad looked at Lew's blood-covered face, then at Bonnie's fear-stricken, white expression of horror.

"If there's water, git some, Bonnie. Set Lew down here alongside me. And don't look so damned spooky. By grab, he ain't hurt bad. I've had my eyes gouged at till the eyeballs hung lower'n my brisket. Water, now, and clean bandages, if there's such things to be had this side of hell. And frisk Tate's carcass fer a bottle."

By all rights old Dad should have died of the two bullet wounds in his tough hide. Either one was sufficient to kill a much younger man. But old Dad Wrangle was tough.

The round, white moon was the only light. Bonnie brought out a small canteen that held hardly a quart of water. She ripped her white petticoat into bandages. And that hard-bitten old renegade, with Bonnie's cool-nerved help, bathed and bandaged the torn eyes of Lew Clayton. And they made a job of it that saved Lew's eyesight.

Cash Rand had torn Lew's eyes loose in their sockets. The sight of it had given Bonnie the most horrible shock she'd ever had. It was a sight that would live forever in her memory—the man she loved, with his eyes torn, his face covered with blood—and Cash Rand on top of him, thumbing back the hammer of a gun shoved against Lew's throat. That shot would have torn Lew's neck apart.

A forty or fifty foot distance had separated Bonnie from the two men locked in that death grip—from the man she loved, with a muzzle of a gun against his throat. There'd been one chance in a million that she could hit her mark. With a prayer on her lips, fear gripping her heart in an icy

clutch, the silver-mounted gun in her hand had spat fire.

She had seen Cash Rand's head jerk convulsively. She had seen the belching fire of Cash's six-shooter as it exploded. And then Lew, whose red blindness had made him miss all that swift, deadly picture, had been clubbing at Cash's bullet-torn head. Bonnie's bullet had hit its target.

Bonnie had thrown the pearl-handled, silver-mounted gun away as if it were a white-hot iron. And on unsteady legs she had run to pull the man she loved, whose life she had saved, away from the dead body of Cash Rand.

That was the red-smeared picture of horror that Bonnie must carry with her forever in her mind and in her heart. It was branded there with hot steel and red blood.

CHAPTER NINE

Miracle of Tainted Gold

AT the little adobe Mexican town of San Juan there is a gray-haired padre with a face as brown as his mended, faded cowled robe, and with dark eyes that reflect the sorrows of his beloved old Mexico. That is Padre Miguel.

There is nothing in his appearance that likens him to his pock-marked brother, Pancho, who owns the Bull Pen on Burro Alley at Mesquite. For their ways are as separated as day from night—Padre Miguel with his wooden beads, Pancho with his gun. Yet they are brothers. And inside their hearts is a resemblance that links them. That is their loyalty and brotherly love for Bonnie, whom both know as Señorita Bonita.

It was to the little town of San Juan that Bonnie rode with the badly wounded old renegade, Dad Wrangle, who was more dead than alive, and the bandaged

Lew Clayton. And Padre Miguel moved out of his own house to make it into a hospital for the wounded men. The padre had a practical knowledge of medicine and surgery, though he took no credit for his skill in mending old Dad's bullet wounds and restoring sight of Lew's eyes.

Only the understanding old Padre Miguel knew that of the three, the girl was the most grievously wounded. For he alone knew who had fired the shot that had killed Cash Rand. It was far better, the brown padre explained to her when she had told him the story, that the old renegade Dad and the young cowboy she was to marry should never know.

There was the matter of returning the badge that had belonged to Bonnie's brother. And there was a letter to be written to the U. S. Marshal at Tucson, explaining the death of Deputy U. S. Marshal Bill Barnard, who had been using the name of Lew Clayton. Also, there must be an account of the killing of the detective, Jones. Bonnie and Lew wrote the letter.

"Me'n Lew'll keep the paper money," insisted old Dad. "The rewards on Stark and the Rail R Rands amount to almost as much as is in the saddlebags Bonnie is takin' care of. We earned that bounty money. The gold is Bonnie's."

"I'm going to keep my brother's badge," said Bonnie, "to remember him by. And I'll take care of the gold money."

They remained at San Juan for weeks. Dad fretted as he lay on his back, his chest and abdomen tightly bandaged. Lew, with a bandage over his eyes, had to sit in a darkened room. Bonnie spent much of her time with Lew. Their first swift love, that had fused like white-hot metal, now strengthened with each dark hour as they sat holding hands, talking out their dreams. And never once did the girl let the blind man know of the terrible grief in her heart.

There were other hours when Bonnie shut herself in the padre's blacksmith shop and melted handful after handful of gold coins into a solid lump. There were more long hours when she worked alone, shut in the padre's little workshop, using his tools, behind closed doors and curtained windows. The brown-frocked padre heard the tap-tap of a small hammer. And Bonnie would come out of the workshop with something wrapped in her black lace mantilla, with her dark blue eyes shining, her white hands soiled, the delicate nails bruised.

Then Dad Wrangle was strong enough to ride again, and was growing more restless with each morning's sunrise. Then came the day when the bandages were removed from Lew's eyes for good.

PADRE MIGUEL married Bonnie and Lew in the little adobe church, with its washed-blue altar and its crude, hand-carved, painted wooden *santos*. And there was a fiesta. Dad Wrangle got gloriously full on the liquor fetched from the Mesquite cantina by Pancho, who came to the wedding with his fat señora and his flock of offspring. The fiesta lasted nearly a week. Then Dad Wrangle sobered up and said it was time the three of them got moving. A hundred miles or so south there was a ranch they could get cheap. It was a big Spanish grant with a remuda of good horses and plenty of cattle.

"It belonged to your mother, Bonnie, handed down a hundred years through four generations. She was Spanish. It was there she and your daddy was killed. You got clear title to the land. The Mexican that runs stock on it will sell his cattle cheap. He's a sort of pardner of mine in the cattle business. Lew, you're marryin' one of the biggest grants in Chihuahua. You kin raise anything there from steel-dust horses to kids. Let's hit the trail."

Lew and Bonnie needed little urging.

They left at dawn, right after the mass Padre Miguel said for them.

As they rode into the sunrise, the old renegade, nibbling at his bottle, grew talkative.

"There's some renegades that make a big livin' robbin' churches down here in Mexico, Lew. But not me. Not that I got religion, but it's bad luck. Man, I've seen solid gold statues three-four foot high in them old churches. Statues like the one at Padre Miguel's little ol' church.

"I never seen a purtier sight than you, Bonnie, a kneelin' there, all in black, your face white and your eyes wet. There was the peacefulest look I ever seen on a woman's face as you kissed that gold figger on the black ebony cross. It like to made a Christian outa me. Eh, Lew? You seen her?"

"Yes. Yes, I saw her, Dad. You'll never look quite as beautiful, honey, as you did when you kissed that crucifix."

Old Dad Wrangle grunted something about lovesick young calves and rode on ahead. Lew grinned after him. When the old renegade was out of sight around a bend on the brush-flanked trail, Lew reached over and pulled gently on Bonnie's bridle reins. And as the two horses halted, heads touching, Lew leaned from his saddle and kissed Bonnie, who was smiling, starry-eyed.

"Where did you learn how to work

gold into a work of real art like that Cristo?" he asked.

"It was my first and only attempt, Lew. You know?"

"Padre Miguel was too excited to keep the secret. He showed it to me last night, with the candles lighting it. He told me you'd melted the gold money, that had cost the lives of so many men, and made it into the Cristo for him to bless. He figured it had somehow made you almighty happy. Padre Miguel called it a miracle."

"Padre Miguel told the truth, Lew. It was a miracle. I knew that when I knelt there this morning. God's given me a greater happiness than I ever hoped to find on earth, Lew—more than you'll ever be able to understand."

Lew Clayton held her close and kissed the tears from her eyes. And he smiled to himself. There was no need ever to let her know that he had seen her with her silver-mounted gun in her hand. He'd seen that gun flash a split second before the red blindness had covered his eyes. He knew that he had fired only once at Cash Rand, and that that shot had missed. But there was no need, ever, to tell her that he shared her secret—and that he understood, far better than she would ever know, that miracle of the gold Cristo at San Juan.

THE END



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Danvers looked at the badge on Jim's vest. He started to laugh. Then he sobered, his hand dropping to his gun.

By **JOHN G. PEARSON**

(Author of "Furlough from Hell," etc.)

For a trumped-up penny-ante theft, Rainbow City hooted Jim Yeager out of the valley. . . . Five desperate years on the outlaw trail trained him for the day he'd come back—a big-time badman, with five gunies at his side, to pay back his sheriff brother's town!

AS CLEARLY as though it had been yesterday, instead of five years ago, Jim Yeager saw the picture of the thing that had driven him from Rainbow Valley. Jogging his bronc along leisurely, he took in the familiar landscape—the bald, round knob of

Eagle Nest Mountain off to his right, the flat mesa up at the head of the slow slope he was climbing. This was the way he had left Rainbow Valley; it was fitting that it should be the trail of his return.

Five years ago Jim Yeager had been

branded a thief—not a big-time robber who held up stagecoaches at the point of a gun, but a little, penny-ante crook who stole from his friends. He was still branded a thief, but a .45 caliber one. Now there were five gunmen waiting back along the trail, waiting till Jim Yeager could do what he'd set out to do in Rainbow City. Now Jim Yeager had become what he'd said he would when he'd left here five years ago.

"So you believe it, too!" he'd said then to his brother, Bill, and his father, as he stood in the doorway of the ranch house. "You really think that I'd stoop to steal sixteen dollars out of old Blimpy Morgan's safe? Can you look me in the eye and say that?"

They had looked him in the eye. Both their faces had been stony.

"The facts are there for everybody to see, Jim," Old Man Yeager had said finally. "There was money in the safe when Blimpy left you in the office. When he came back and looked in it, after you had gone out, the sixteen dollars was gone. Blimpy Morgan wouldn't lie. He liked you. He damn near cried when I finally pinned him down. He didn't need the sixteen dollars. But when he went to get it to pay a bill, an' saw it was gone, he mentioned it in front of Dirk Wheeler. It was Dirk Wheeler that spread the news, Jim—not Morgan."

Jim Yeager had stood there for a while, troubled, trying to think of some way he could convince them that this thing wasn't true.

"Well," he had said, "I guess that's that. If it was there when he went out and gone when he came back, I guess there's no argument. All I can say is that I didn't take it. I didn't need a measly sixteen bucks. Why, I . . ."

Then he had stopped. It wasn't any use. They'd never believe him. Jim Yeager's face had reddened as he stood

there and looked at his father and brother. Sixteen dollars! A measly sum like that! They had believed he'd taken it. And what the hell could he say to prove he didn't?

"Okay," he had said wrathfully. "All right, I took it! I took that and I'll take a hell of a lot more. If I'm a thief, I'll be a hell of a good one. Maybe you'll read about it in the papers!"

Jim Yeager had turned then and ridden away. He hadn't had any money in his pockets. So he had stolen some. He had stuck a gun in a fellow's belly and taken forty dollars. He had got a great kick out of that. They had accused him, unjustly, of swiping sixteen bucks. Forty bucks was more than that. . . . Now he really was a thief. He'd show them!

And he did show them. In a year Jim Yeager had five men riding with him. But he didn't get his name in the papers. Nobody heard about him. Nobody knew who he was. But he stole plenty. He robbed banks and stagecoaches. . . .

He was on his way to rob another bank now. He was going to show Bill Yeager how a good crook worked his game. Those folks in Rainbow City who had smiled at him with such a superior air—maybe they'd like to see just how a real thief did his stuff. He'd show them. Jim Yeager was on his way to loot the bank at Rainbow City. Cleverly, with no danger to himself nor his men, he'd clean it out. And after it was all over, they'd know that he had done it.

Jim Yeager felt that his little plan would work. He was going to put a sob story up to his brother. His father, he had learned, was dead. Bill Yeager had been elected Sheriff of Rainbow City. If Jim's scheme worked, Bill Yeager would learn how it felt to be sneered at. They'd sneer at him, all right—for being a fool. . . .

NOBODY seemed to recognize Jim Yeager as he rode into Rainbow City. He had broadened and hardened. He was leaner and more darkly tanned than when he'd left. He headed up the street, stopped at the sign that said "Sheriff's Office," swung off his bronc and went up to the door.

Bill Yeager was there, sitting at a desk at one side of the office. As Jim looked at Bill's badge, he experienced a cruel sense of satisfaction.

"Hello, Bill," he said hesitantly.

Bill Yeager, young, bronzed and lean, rose. He stepped over in front of Jim, then smiled and thrust out his hand.

"Hello, Jim," he said, and Jim wondered at the soft note in his voice.

"I was riding past," Jim went on. "I wasn't gonna stop, Bill. Then I happened to hear something that I thought you oughta know. When I spill it, you'll know I don't hold any hard feelings. Or do you know that now?"

"I hope you don't, Jim," said Bill. "I always did hope it. I never really believed that—that crazy yarn. But dad believed it. I guess he did till he died. He was more hurt than anything else. He wasn't sore, Jim. He was just hurt, way deep down inside of him. He didn't go to town for nearly a year."

So Bill hadn't believed it! Perhaps not, but he'd acted a hell of a lot like he'd believed it. And the old man was hurt! Jim Yeager wondered how they imagined he felt, if maybe he had been hurt.

"I'm—I'm sorry about dad," Jim said. "What I'm gonna spill to you now will test your faith in me a lot more than it did then, when they said I stole that sixteen dollars."

Bill Yeager smiled—a sort of forced smile, it seemed to Jim.

"I don't believe a Yeager ever stole a

dime, Jim," he said softly. "Or ever would tell a lie. Go ahead."

Jim Yeager took a deep breath. He had expected Bill to still be a little frosty. He had figured he'd have to put on an act to get his plan over. But this looked like it was going to be easy.

"I camped last night," Jim Yeager explained, "just outside of here. In the dark some gents rode past me. They didn't see me, but I heard 'em talking. They were planning to rob the bank here today. I don't know their stunt, but they mentioned something about having the place sewed up right after noon. They said they'd be able to shoot down anybody that tried to stop 'em. I figured you oughta know that, Bill. So I come in to tell you."

Bill frowned. Then he said just what Jim knew he'd say:

"You didn't hear any more, Jim? You don't know *how* they'd have the town sewed up, how they'd be able to shoot down anybody that tried to stop them?"

Jim shook his head.

"No," he said. "I didn't hear that. But I did hear something else. And this is what will test your trust in me, Bill. This is where I come in. I heard 'em say they'd camp overnight, and stay till noon, at Pierre Laval's hideout."

Bill looked puzzled.

"I don't savvy—" he started.

"I know where Pierre Laval's hideout is," said Jim Yeager. "When I left here I was bitter as hell. I figured that if everybody thought I was a thief I might as well go ahead and be one. I decided to join up with Laval, but I couldn't go through with it. That's why I said it'd test your faith in me. I can tell you where this outlaw bunch is camped, where they'll be today, right now and up till noon, if you'll take my word for it."

Bill Yeager reached out, put a hand on Jim's shoulder. He gave Jim a sort

of pat, then reached over on his desk and picked up a deputy's badge.

"Sure, I'll take your word for it," he said. "I'll do more than that, if you'll accept it. You don't look like you've got a job. I'll make you a deputy. Maybe some folks here won't like it. But like it or not, I'll pin it on you if you say the word."

Jim could hardly suppress a laugh. This was rich! Here he had made Bill swallow a tall tale that would send Bill and a big posse into the hills before noon. Here he'd made it possible for his own men, hiding out in the brakes now, to rob the bank when all the fighting men were gone. And Bill was offering to pin a badge on him!

"Sure!" said Jim. "Pin it on, Bill. And I sure appreciate it."

He smiled inwardly at that. He did appreciate it. It was a hell of a good joke. . . .

JIM YEAGER rode at the tail of the long column of men, out of Rainbow City, heading up into the hills toward a certain cave he knew of. He'd told Bill that cave was Pierre Laval's hideout. It wasn't, as far as Jim knew. But it served its purpose now. It was a place to go, to get all these men out of town so the rest of the gang could sweep in and loot the bank of a defenseless town.

From the sun's position, Jim knew it was nearly noon. It was about time for his men to strike Rainbow City. In just a few minutes they'd be there. Jim had told them where he'd lead the posse. He'd told them to watch this trail until they saw the men leaving town.

They'd rob the bank, then hide out in the brakes again, wait for Jim to show up. The matter of the empty cave, with no evidence of bandits having camped there, would be easily explained. Anybody could make a mistake. Maybe the

bandits had said *come* to Pierre Laval's hideout, instead of *camp* at it. Maybe they had gone there and left. Anything could have happened. Anyway, it wouldn't make a hell of a lot of difference whether they thought he had pulled a fast one or not—not after he'd made his getaway and joined his men in the brakes.

Before the sun was at its zenith, the posse climbed the hills, looked down on the rocky fastness which Jim had said was the hideout of Pierre Laval. Bill Yeager turned, looked inquiringly at Jim.

"Nobody there, Jim," he said.

"Mebby there wasn't anybody supposed to be there," said Havers, one of the posse, suspiciously. "Mebby Jim Yeager just had a pipe dream."

Jim didn't speak. Neither did Bill. Jim knew they didn't like him. They all resented the badge he had on his shirt front. They remembered the sixteen dollars Jim was supposed to have stolen from Blimpy Morgan's safe.

"I don't think anybody had a pipe dream, Havers," Bill Yeager said after a while. "Maybe something went wrong with their plans. Jim just told us what he heard. He didn't guarantee them damn bandits would keep their word. In fact, I never knew one that did do what he said he'd do, even among themselves."

Somehow, it bothered Jim to have Bill defending him, then belittling bandits, saying they were all damn liars. Bill, of course, didn't know that Jim had been a bandit. He was accepting Jim as an honest man.

"Mebby we better shake a leg back to town," suggested Jim. "Mebby this thing is all wrong, at that."

Jim felt that was the diplomatic thing to say. They'd remember that he had been the one to suggest that they hurry back. They'd think he was worried about all this. Then he cursed himself for giving a damn what they thought. To hell

with them, Bill Yeager included! By now the bank would have been emptied. By this time Danvers, Stevens and the others would be out in the brakes.

They rode back at a fast clip. About five miles out of town, they met an old man riding a crow-bait mare, waving his hands, yelling.

"The bank's been robbed! They cleaned it out! Five of 'em sailed into town at noon! They—"

His words were drowned by the rushing rumble of hoofs. The posse surged forward, galloped into town. Bill Yeager talked to the bank cashier, then motioned for Jim.

"They headed west," he said. "Come on, Jim. Maybe we can get 'em."

They started to remount, then Bill turned. He looked at the sullen crowd, the posse that still stood in front of the bank.

"Well," he said, "you comin'?"

Havers, the gent who had spoken up in the hills, shook his head.

"I don't reckon we will, Bill," he said. "You go ahead, ride with the sixteen dollar pickpocket you've got for a deputy. As long as he's in the game, we'll stay out. I guess that puts it pretty plain, don't it?"

Bill's face flushed, then whitened. He looked at Jim, then at Havers again.

"Plenty plain, Havers," he said softly. "And now I'll say something I should have said a long time ago. It's just this—anybody that says Jim Yeager stole Blimpy Morgan's money is a damn liar! Is that plain enough, Havers?"

"Plenty," said Havers. "We both know where we stand. And if you didn't have a badge on your vest, I'd—"

"I'll take it off when I get back!" snapped Bill Yeager. "And damned glad to oblige! Let's go, Jim."

JIM found it hard to think clearly as he raced along beside Bill. It seemed funny as hell to be riding with Bill, to know that Bill was willing to shuck his badge and fight a man who had slandered him.

They hit the brakes and dipped down into the badlands. They circled, but found no tracks. Finally they stopped and looked at one another.

"You cut west, Jim," Bill said. "And I'll cut east. Make a circle and come back here. If you hit any trail sign, fire a couple shots. I'll come a-runnin'."

Jim Yeager raced away again, in the direction he knew Danvers, Stevens and the others had gone. He hit their sign and followed it to the ravine where they were waiting.

Danvers, lean, dark and saturnine, looked at the badge on Jim's vest. He started to laugh. Then he sobered, his hand dropping to his gun.

"What the hell!" he said.

"Don't get panicky," Jim told Danvers, grinning, tapping the badge with his thumb. "This is a souvenir. Mebby it'll come in handy again sometime. How much you get?"

Danvers gestured toward a bulging saddlebag on the ground near a mesquite. "A little over twelve thousand," he said. "You ready to ride?"

Ready to ride? Jim Yeager lied then, and wondered why he did it. He knew damn well that Bill had defended him simply because Bill didn't want a stain on the Yeager name. Bill hadn't done it because of him. So there was no reason for his saying what he did—lying to Danvers and these others.

"This is too good to leave," he said. "It's pie, and we'd be fools to run away from it. I'm in, back there. When one of the posse suggested that mebby all this was a frame-up, Bill raised hell, offered to gun-fight him. Stick around,

and I'll have another sweet job in just a little while."

They looked at one another and grinned.

Jim Yeager rode away, made his circle and came back to where he'd left Bill. Bill wasn't there, and Jim found himself wondering about the crazy thing he'd done. There was nothing to stay for. There'd be no more jobs, and hell would be brewing back in town. Jim knew that. He knew they'd sneer at him, insult him. And he knew he'd probably wind up by shooting some loose-tongued jasper in the brisket.

He looked up the rise, and saw Bill coming back. The fact that Bill was sticking up for him made no difference, he told himself. The reason he wanted to go back to town was to see Bill squirm, just as he himself had squirmed five years ago. Jim knew the folks at Rainbow City. Give them a week, and they'd be saying that Bill Yeager was in on a frame-up with his brother, Jim. They'd say something about bad blood. . . . Then Bill would know exactly how Jim had felt when they'd fastened that penny-ante sixteen buck deal on him.

"See anything, Jim?" asked Bill as he rode up.

"Not a thing," said Jim.

Bill nodded, a little tiredly, a little discouragedly, it seemed to Jim. Likely, Bill knew what he'd have to face when he got back to town.

"Okay," Bill said. "It's—it's just one of them things, I guess."

They didn't speak as they rode back. Jim watched Bill, saw him frown, saw that he was worried. He was worried about his reputation, Jim guessed. The Yeager reputation was going downhill fast. That was swell. Jim would stick around till it hit bottom.

They dismounted at the sheriff's office; went inside. Bill sat down and looked

out the window, down toward the saloon and the bank, where a bunch of folks were still congregated. His gaze was moody, and his hands rubbed absently at the badge on his vest. Finally he unpinned it. He hitched up his belt, went to the door.

"I'll be back in a minute," he told Jim.

Jim knew where Bill was going—to meet Havers. Jim started to tell him not to go. Maybe Havers was pretty good with a gun. Maybe he'd kill Bill.

Then Bill was gone. Jim sat there, watching him walk down the street. He went into the saloon. In a minute he came out. He went on down to the bank, talked to a couple of men, then started up the street again. He came on up to the sheriff's office, sat down wearily at his desk.

"Havers left town," Bill finally said.

"That's good," Jim Yeager sighed. He was relieved, but he didn't know why.

"That's bad," said Bill Yeager. "I wouldn't have shot Havers. Nothing would have made me do that. I'd have taken off my badge, but I'd have taken off my gun, too. I'd have licked hell out of him, Jim. But he thinks I'd have killed him. That's bad. His running away will make folks think the same as he did. It's given them a lot of wild ideas."

JIM slept in the sheriff's office. Next morning he went down to the restaurant for his breakfast. The man behind the counter didn't speak to him. The fellow looked like he'd swallowed something that didn't agree with him when Jim Yeager came in.

Suddenly a commotion broke out in the street. Jim rose, with his breakfast half-eaten. He looked out the door, and saw Bill Yeager standing over a man who was down in the dust.

"I guess knockin' hell out of you don't

prove you're a liar," Bill was saying. "But it might make folks learn to keep their dirty, lyin' tongues behind their teeth!"

The man in the street rose, dusted himself off. He sneered at Bill Yeager.

"The next thing, I suppose," he snarled, "you'll be usin' your gun. Mebbe you think that'd prove something!"

"I'm not a gun-fighter," said Bill Yeager, "except against those gents that break the law and ride with guns in their hands. I don't fight with guns among town folks."

There was a laugh from the side of the street, where a crowd had gathered.

"That about fits the Yeagers," a voice called deridingly. "No gun-fighters! Small-time—sixteen dollar limit!"

Bill tried to see who had spoken, but he couldn't. There were only broad smiles to greet his inquiring eyes.

Jim went out, without finishing his breakfast. Somehow, he wasn't hungry now. Small-time—sixteen dollar limit. . . . Damn their souls! Somberly, Jim Yeager watched Bill go up the street to the sheriff's office. But Jim didn't follow. He didn't want to see Bill just now.

He stood by the General Store and watched the folks go past. Nobody looked at him. Nobody spoke. Jim Yeager sneered. To hell with them! He had their money. That was what he'd come for. He'd leave and forget it.

He listened to a voice that was talking shrilly inside the General Store. He didn't recognize it.

"But I give you a check last night for my whole account."

"I can't cash it," came the storekeeper's voice. "The bank is broke. Can't you savvy that? They don't have any money. I can't keep on putting out groceries and supplies for a bunch of checks that won't ever be good. Sure, you had money. But you don't have it now. There's an old lady, a widow woman, across the street

that had money, too. She spent just so much a month, spreading it out so she'd have enough to keep her the rest of her life. But now it's all gone. . . ."

Jim Yeager moved away, up the street. He was worried, bothered. He cursed himself for staying here. He told himself he'd go up to Bill, make some excuse, ride away and not come back. To hell with all this squawk about widows with their money gone, ranchers who couldn't get supplies! He passed a couple of men as he went along. They were talking, too.

"It just about breaks the town," one of them said. "Most all little accounts—school teacher, preacher, and a bunch of nesters. Bank had no insurance. Poor devils will go hungry, I reckon."

Cripes! Wouldn't they ever stop talking about it? School teachers, widow women, preachers. . . . What the hell!

Jim's boots took on a quick, angry beat as he went up the street. Penny-ante—sixteen dollar limit. Wasn't that what that jasper had yelled? No gun-fighters—small-time. . . .

Well, damn it, was robbing a bank small-time? Was breaking a community penny-ante stuff? They'd called him a sixteen dollar thief! But he'd shown them. He'd—

Jim found himself wondering if he had shown them. He found himself wondering if stealing sixteen dollars out of Blimpy Morgan's safe was any meaner, any more penny-ante, than taking the money a widow had saved to live on. Maybe the school teacher didn't have much more than sixteen bucks in the bank. Maybe there were a lot of folks who didn't have that much. Jim Yeager began to wonder if maybe he wasn't just what they said he was—a penny-ante badman, a small-time thief with a sixteen dollar limit.

He'd been sore as hell when they'd

called him that before, when they had no reason to. But now he was just that.

"I think I'll take a ride," he said to Bill when he went into the office. "Mebby I can find something interesting."

Bill Yeager looked up with a wan sort of grin. With his left palm, he caressed the knuckles of his right hand.

"Okay," he said. "And don't let this get under your hide, Jim. This bank robbery just happened to make it a little harder, that's all. We'll teach them that any Yeager is an honest man, or we'll wear out the seat of their britches from slidin' in the street!"

JIM YEAGER rode south—toward the brakes. He headed for the place where Danvers and the others were hidden. He kept telling himself that he'd join them and ride for the border again.

That's what he told himself, but he knew he was a liar. He knew he was going to make a damn fool of himself when he reached the hideout. He knew that Bill Yeager, no matter what he had done or thought five years ago, was a hell of a swell fellow.

The school teacher and the widow and a lot of nesters were in a fix. Jim didn't care to go on through life, remembering that. Just because he hadn't stopped to think that a bank was made up of the deposits of the little people, still there was a chance to square it with them.

Until now he'd been thinking what a big gent he'd become. He'd been telling himself that he was Jim Yeager, the big-timer, the hombre who didn't stoop to little things. Then, all of a sudden, he had discovered that he wasn't big-time at all. He was just what that jasper had called the Yeagers back there—penny-ante, sixteen dollar caliber.

As Jim dismounted, he watched Danvers and Stevens and the three others come out of the brush. He looked at the

bulging saddlebag, over by the mesquite. The money was packed, ready for their getaway.

"What's up?" Danvers asked. "Some news?"

Jim hesitated, watching them. He wondered just how far he'd get before they'd go for their guns.

"There's hell to pay back there," Jim said softly. "I'm just getting the low-down on this bank robbery business. Just today I learned what it was all about."

He stopped, studying their faces. But they didn't move, didn't speak. They knew something was coming. They knew it by the still, statue-like pose of Jim Yeager, by the somber flame in his eyes.

"I come to tell you it's all off," Jim went on suddenly. "I'll take the money back and give it to the bank. There's—"

He stopped. He knew it wouldn't do any good to tell about the little fellows who had accounts in the bank. Danvers wouldn't give a damn for anything that Bill Yeager had done or said, or how Bill had looked when he'd rubbed his knuckles and said he'd teach 'em that the Yeagers were honest, or wear out the seat of their britches a-trying.

Little things like that counted with Jim, but they wouldn't make a damn bit of difference to these hard-faced jaspers.

"Well?" said Danvers. "There's—there's what?"

Jim Yeager shook his head.

"That's all, Danvers," he said softly.

"That's the way I see it. I take the money back, or I stay here—permanent."

Danvers sighed deeply. A slight, crooked grin cracked the stoniness of his swarthy face. Then he leaped to one side—and his hand flashed toward his holster.

TO JIM, it seemed as though they all moved at once. He knew they didn't, because he killed Danvers before any shot

but his own had sounded. But they were fast, fast enough to hit him three times before he downed Stevens.

Somehow, while he fought, Jim Yeager felt the irony of it all. Here he was, battling for the money he himself had helped steal, just so he could take it back to those he had stolen it from. It didn't make sense. He knew that he wanted to do it, that he would do it—or die here. But he didn't know why. That was funny. Willing to die for something he didn't care a damn about—honor, the good name of the Yeagers. . . .

"Educate 'em or wear out the seat of their britches."

Jim Yeager's legs were weak and his eyes were blurred as he let his thumbs work the long-flanged hammers of his sixguns. He knew there were plenty of bullets in him, more than he liked to think about. He knew he'd be lucky as hell if he managed to live long enough to get those saddlebags back to town.

A bullet smashed Jim Yeager backward. He shot as he fell, saw the fourth of them go down.

"A Yeager never stole a dime. Educate 'em!"

There were two more shots—flat, final shots that seemed to spell the end of the world. Then there wasn't any movement. Jim lay on the ground, watching the dim shapes that didn't move.

He twisted his lips into a crooked grin

as he staggered erect. He lifted the saddlebags that held the bank money. He climbed on his horse, swayed crazily in his saddle as he rode toward town.

He was satisfied with what he had done. He knew Bill would be satisfied, too. A lot of folks, like the nester who couldn't pay his bill, the widow, the teacher, would be satisfied.

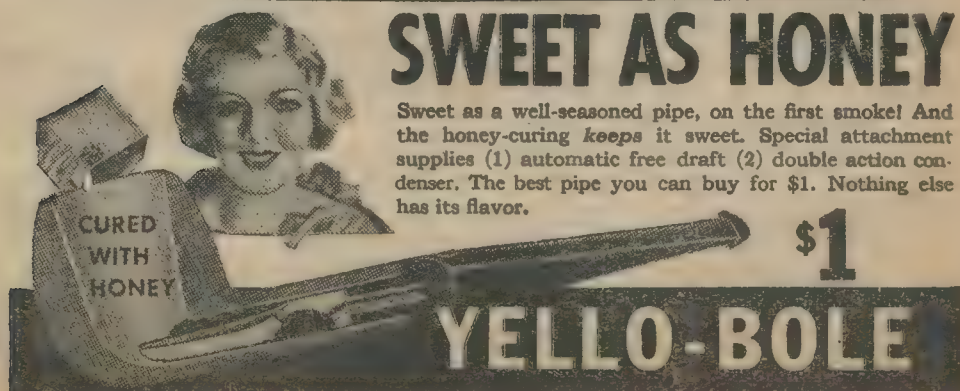
Jim didn't know where he was riding. He'd have to trust his bronc to take him into town.

He realized vaguely, after an hour or two, that he was riding down the main street. He knew folks were talking. They were saying things that sounded swell, that contradicted a lot of things they'd said before. He knew somebody was ranting about fools who had the nerve to think that a gent like Jim Yeager would steal sixteen bucks.

Jim smiled. It was funny how swell it seemed to have folks say you were fine. Funny how he knew everything was okay now. Soon as he was well again, he'd keep 'em all thinking the way they did. It was funny how little things counted so much—like the gent who didn't have groceries, the teacher, the widow, and Bill Yeager's saying:

"Educate 'em or wear out the seat of their britches—"

A Yeager sure had educated 'em. Nothing penny-ante about the Yeagers!



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KILLERS GO NORTH—TO DIE!

By TOM ROAN

(Author of "Two Against the Desert Legion," etc.)

A merciless voice came to him then: "Put up your hands, McKenna!"



Strange are the ways of the Northland, where a Montana fugitive found refuge and wealth and a beautiful woman's brave, clean love—in the cabin of a deaf and dumb giant who had sought to kill him. . . . But stranger yet was the murder brand that hounded an innocent man from the happy-go-lucky Western range to the death-bound Arctic Circle—where even the strongest die!

THEY faced each other across the splintered mass of wreckage that had been the cabin table. Two blood-dripping giants faced each other, with their clothing torn to shreds, their faces hammered into pulp, their breaths

screams and whistling gasps as their chests rose and fell like madly pumping bellows.

Here in this little snow-mounded cabin, right under the shadow of the Arctic Circle, it was the most desperate, man-

killing battle Big Tom McKenna had ever fought. Himself a blue-eyed, blond giant, he faced an even larger giant, a bushy-haired, black-bearded, noseless and earless beast six feet seven inches tall and weighing somewhere in the neighborhood of three hundred pounds.

The black-haired man was all bone and muscle, without an ounce of surplus fat on his body. He seemed to know but little of the science of side-stepping and boxing. He had not tried to avoid a single blow that McKenna had swung, with such wild fury, at his face and body. He seemed insensible to pain. Once, knocked off his feet, he had laughed a wild, nerve-shattering cackle, and then had come up—a grunting, berserk animal with glittering gray eyes leering with hate.

Rough-shod cabin furniture had gone to glory. A rattletrap sheet-iron stove was down in the corner, with hot ashes and glowing coals spilled on the thick, hand-hewn planks of the floor. Pots and pans, a broken bag of beans and a make-shift chair lay underfoot, reduced to trampled wreckage in the thirty-minute mauling and hammering battle that had been going on. And yet the giants were not through.

McKenna had never seen such a man. At noon he had come upon the cabin, in a little valley at the head of a frozen waterway. He had taken advantage of the shelter and had helped himself from a battered coffee pot on the back of the stove and a pan of roasted moose meat in the oven. Two hours later, a noseless thing on moccasins and in frost-rimmed furs had opened the door to step inside. The fellow had taken one good look at McKenna, had flung off his furs, and had charged him with the scream of a madman.

Six times in that raging battle that had followed, McKenna had knocked the man off his feet. Once the giant had remained on the floor for all of three minutes, a broken, helpless hulk sprawled

back on one elbow, bloody head shaking, lips sucking and whistling for breath. McKenna had tried to talk to him. The giant had glowered and mumbled, but not one intelligible word had come from him.

It had taken a long time for McKenna to realize that he was fighting a deaf and dumb brute, an evident madman who intended to kill him and tear him limb from limb with his powerful, stubby-nailed hands. All during the fight the man had kept screeching and pointing to his shapeless nose and earless head.

Now, with their first breathing spell in ten minutes, McKenna again tried to talk to the man. He tried sign-talk, the language of all the world in the out-of-way places. But the giant only grinned that evil grin, standing there like a black bull, ready to charge, his breath whistling, thick lips fluttering. He pointed once more to his face and head, touching the blood-red scar where his nose had been and the two ragged ridges of flesh at either side of his head. Another of those wild screams of inhuman laughter came from him, and again he was charging, head down, powerful arms and fists lunging pistons, the moccasined feet crashing through the wreckage of the broken table.

It was the end. Big Tom McKenna, fugitive from justice, realized it. His arms were like useless clubs of rubber now, his legs like stilts. He weaved to one side, and managed to smash home another blow. The black-haired giant only laughed that wicked splatter of sound. He caught McKenna in his powerful, gorilla-like arms.

McKenna's left foot tangled itself in the remains of a broken chair. With the snarl of a wild animal, he went down—with the sneering, smacking giant atop him.

"Damn you!" McKenna screamed that like a woman in death agony.

His rubber-like right fist again shot up, making its wild lunge more with terror than with strength. It smashed into the

giant's slobbering and smacking mouth, sending the blood splattering.

Another of those wild, unearthly laughs answered him, a furious outrush of crazy sound. He saw a great ham of a fist, covered with black hair and blood, rise like a maul above him. He saw it poise, steady, and come smashing down.

There was a dull jar—and a thousand lights flashed in front of his face. The fist struck again—and again. Each time it struck there was one of those crazy laughs. . . . The giant was killing him now, tearing him to shreds, making chopped meat and broken bones out of the upturned face.

McKenna remembered something about the giant tearing the rest of his clothing from him. He remembered something about the giant standing over him with a long knife in his hand, standing there like some primitive savage, the powerful legs spread, moccasined feet planted on either side of him, great chest swelling, that wild, fiercely roaring laughter filling the cabin, and then the man dropping astride of him. Darkness blotted out the rest of it. . . .

TWO days later, Big Tom McKenna opened his eyes and drifted slowly back to an awareness of his surroundings. He lay there, listening to the winds of the North moaning about the cross-logged corners of the cabin. An old, cast-iron tea-kettle sang merrily somewhere. The faint odor of sourdough bread came to his nostrils. Beyond the foot of the bunk, with its covering of soft skins, crackled a fire in a rough fireplace.

He glanced to the window at his left. It was a mere dog hole of glass, covered with three inches of frost. For a moment he thought he was back in Montana, up there in the old line cabin on the eastern slopes of the Rockies and on the western rim of his father's Lucky X range. He

had had, he decided, one hell of a dream, a dream of being arrested for murder, the dream of a jury finding him guilty, of fat old Judge Larkin sentencing him to hang, and a midnight escape from the old cottonwood-log jail in Cougar Pass.

A hell of a dream! It had been a long nightmare of flight across Canada, with Northwest Mounted Police on his trail, hounding him in their slow, carefully methodical way. For weeks he had found safety with one of old Jim McKenna's boyhood friends in the northwestern tip of Saskatchewan, while friends in Montana were working night and day to clear him of one of the worst murders and robberies in the state.

Just when it had begun to look as if the work of his friends would bear fruit and he would be given another trial, a startling, blood-chilling tale had found its way to him.

Big Tom McKenna, according to that report, had been cornered in a hut at Peace River Landing, over in Alberta, and had killed three Northwest Mounted Police in a fight that had led to his escape!

One nightmare after another, one tale of robbery and death fast on the heels of the last one! Men now hunted him like a killer wolf, like a monster who had become a menace to all humanity. In the long weary months that had followed, two more Northwest Mounted Police had died, shot down without warning in their tracks. Friends in Montana had ceased their tireless work in his behalf. Tom McKenna's name had become a terror to men. Wherever he had found a settlement or a trading post, he had heard his name mentioned with blasphemous bitterness on the lips of men.

It all came back to him, lying there in the bunk with his head, body and hands swathed in rough bandages. It was an awful picture, a picture of terror and

damnation, of last-minute escapes, of month after month of hair-lifting adventures. He had lived like a wolf, managing to shoot fresh meat here and there with the old .45 he carried on his hip.

The memory of the bushy-haired, noseless and earless giant came back to him, and everything was clear. That noseless beast had heard of Tom McKenna. News had its mysterious way of seeping to the very heart of this frozen hell of the North, where the cabins and settlements of men were countless miles apart.

Beaten into a pulp, a helpless, human wreck barely able to move his hands or feet, it came to McKenna that he would soon be going back to civilization—and to the rope, waiting for him in Montana and Canada. A Mounted Policeman would soon come from somewhere. Mounted Police had that uncanny habit of popping up at the most unexpected times to place an arresting hand on the shoulder of a wanted man.

He lay there, thinking and thinking, until he dropped back into a long, deep sleep with a feeling almost of relief that it was over at last. When he awoke again, the black-haired giant was bending over him, doing something with the bandage on his head.

THE giant's face was still a mass of purple spots from the fight. His eyes were blue-black and swollen. One of them was only a slit of bruised flesh. His lips were thick, the left side of his mouth twisted upward in the black beard, and a sickly smelling ointment covered the many cuts on his face.

McKenna opened his swollen lids as far as he could. He moved his head to one side, and looked up at the giant, with a low groan that was an attempt to speak.

The giant studied him for a moment, then reached to the foot of the bunk to

pick up a big slate. He held the slate in front of McKenna's face. On it—written in a clear but heavy hand—McKenna read:

I am Abel Lang, a trapper who has lived in this cabin for twenty years. I am sorry I mauled you as I did. I thought you were another man, and I intended to kill you for what he did to me. You look enough like him to be his twin brother. I took him in when he was freezing.

He repaid me one day while I was out on the trap-line by doing a terrible thing to Toketie, my wife, a half-breed Nootkan. We fought when I learned of it. He struck me over the head with a gun, and cut off my ears, my nose and tongue. He left me for dead, and took Toketie away with him. That was three months ago. I could not leave the cabin for a long time, but some day Toketie will come back to me and tell me where I will find Tom McKenna. He has a ship tattooed on his chest and an anchor and a star on his left forearm.

McKenna's eyes widened as he lay there, staring at the message on the slate. Then, moved by a sudden impulse, he reached for the slate. The giant rubbed it clean on his forearm, and thrust a stubby slate pencil between McKenna's fingers. McKenna hesitated for an instant, and wrote:

I am glad I came here, for I am Tom McKenna. But I have killed nor robbed no man. I never saw you before the fight. I am a victim of mistaken identity, and you have given me my first ray of hope in months!

The giant took the slate. He looked at it for a long time, puckering his swollen lips. Finally he nodded, wiped the slate clean, and wrote again. And McKenna read, and wrote. They continued until long, long after the short, sunless day had passed, and the deep purple Arctic night had come down upon them, to lock the lone land in darkness and bitter, cold silence.

BIG TOM McKENNA could not have found a more loyal friend in all the world. It was Abel Lang who nursed the strapping giant of six-foot-three back to health. It was Abel Lang who advised him to allow his beard to grow. It was Abel Lang who brewed a hellish concoction of barks and twigs and winter berries that changed him from a fair-skinned blond to a dark giant with hair as straight and black as an Indian's.

He must have brought luck to Abel Lang. When spring came and the ice went out, Abel Lang went out on the tail of the ice with a huge old canoe piled high with furs, the finest catch made by any man above the headwaters of Lonesome River in thirty years. They had extended their lines until it looked as if they would cover the entire top of the world. The work had been man-killing, but every trap had done its bountiful share, and the old canoe had taken a fortune down the river.

For months Tom McKenna fought it out alone with the mosquitoes and the gnats. Visions of the terrible, grizzly bear mauling he had received at the hands of Lang came back to him, but there was never a single thought of resentment. Besides, there was work to do. He cut many sticks of the virgin timber in the valley. From logs with a straight grain, he split an enormous pile of boards. With labor that would have killed a mule, he dragged and rolled the logs in place, adding larger and better rooms to the little cabin and topping them with a high, sharp roof of boards.

Fall came. The winds sharpened. Tom McKenna killed the meat, four moose, a pair of fat caribou, and a lone elk that came to the valley late one afternoon. From the river he made his catch of salmon, enough to feed a dozen men and twice as many dogs through a long winter, and he cured them over slow fires.

Meat and fish hung in a lean-to at the side of the largest room he had added to the cabin. Hanging there, too, were strings of wild geese, duck and a species of big grouse from down the valley, where he had snared dozens of rabbits and carefully skinned them. Tom McKenna had done the work of a half dozen men, and he had done it well.

They would take it easier this winter. They would be warmer, and have things to eat that one did not usually find in cabins this far north. For instance, that barrel of goose and duck eggs, salted down under the floor of the main room, would be something for a man to brag about. Like a miser after gold, he kept gathering everything that came to hand.

Winter crept closer, and Tom McKenna kept his eye on the river. Any day now, Lang's great canoe would be turning that bend in the distance. McKenna watched the ice form its shaggy shelves along the edges of the stream. The last of the wild geese went out, flying dark wedges against the graying sky. High up the old ganders were leading their flocks, bound for the southlands, with the wind and frost in their beaked faces and round little shoe-button eyes, their sharp or faint *honk-chee, honk-chee*-ing lonesomely sad notes in the air.

Slowly, surely, winter settled its death-white grip on the land. The river turned to solid ice. The Arctic night came down. The land became silent and dead, so lone and cold a man's heart felt like freezing in his body.

ABEL LANG, with thirty thousand dollars worth of furs to his credit, did not come back.

Toketie came instead. Her tall, golden-skinned image of black-eyed beauty faced McKenna in the doorway of the old cabin one bitter-raw day when he returned from the traps laden with furs.

He stood, shocked still with amazement, looking at her for a long time, wondering who this beautiful girl-vision could be. He had never seen an Indian like her, never one so tall, so stately and fine, one with her chin tilted just so. She was like a painting, standing there framed in the snow-bound doorway of the cabin, with the light of the snow reflected like a halo on her blue-black hair, and a faint expression of fatigue in her oval face.

She was the first to speak. She spoke to him in a voice that was almost a musical whisper:

"I am Toketie. You are, when there are no others around, Tom McKenna. When others are about, you are George Sheehan, from Oregon. Abel Lang has told me everything. Abel Lang is dead. He sent me back to you with the money for the furs. I came this morning. Three Indians with great sleds brought me. They have gone. I am your woman."

He stood there staring, unable to believe this thing. Words refused to come to him. He saw her turn her face and look off and away across the snow-covered hills. He saw her lift her eyes and look at the sky, and then she was looking back at him and speaking again:

"On the way out, Abel Lang fell in the river and broke his leg in the Barren Lands. In the Barren Lands there is no wood for a fire. I was on my way here when I found him. He was very sick. The white men call it pneumonia. For a long time he was as dead. I sold the fur. He said my bargain was better than he could have made. But his leg was bad. In a long time he died. I have all the money except for the price of the supplies I brought in and the pay of the Indians who came with the sleds. It is in the cabin, under the head of your bunk, where a good husband's money belongs. And you will be a good husband. I have looked at the meat and the fish."

Tom McKenna said, "Yes, I will be a good husband."

And in this remote cabin, far from the paths of civilization, these two repeated the simple words of an Indian pledge that declared them man and wife.

THE winter fires burned merrily, casting dancing figures of light and shade along the rough log walls of the cabins. The meat pots simmered on the sheet-iron stove, giving off their ever pleasing aromas. The clear, cold air filled a man's body and soul with a new life, here in the far-flung land of white.

Toketie walked beside her man or broke trail for him as they made their rounds of traps. In the cabin she sang to him the soft incantations of the Nootkans, and sat on a folded blanket at his feet, mending or making clothing for him. In the forest or on the barren trails she was like a goddess, her hands always ready to reach forward to help him.

At first, he had accepted her because he was lonesome, because there was little else for him to do. But soon she became his right hand, anticipating his every thought. Now and then he caught himself thinking of the day to come when he could go back to civilization, and something told him he would leave Toketie behind. Toketie meant Pretty, but it was a month before he knew its meaning.

Spring came all too soon. The ice went out, Toketie bossed the building of the raft and helped with the gathering of the logs. Toketie saw to the loading of the furs. She selected the supplies to last them down the river to the Hudson Bay trading post. It was Toketie who handled the sweep through the Barren Lands and the rough water where Abel Lang had almost failed with a canoe.

At the trading post, she amazed McKenna with her efficiency. No Arab had a keener eye or a sharper tongue than

Toketie, when it came to arguing the price of fur with Old Timblewaite, the factor. She traded slowly, evenly, carefully. She was just as careful and shrewd when it came to buying a canoe and supplies to take back up the river, and she amazed McKenna with her strength as her paddle bit deeply into the rough water on the way home.

A great uneasiness slipped from his shoulders when they were home again and busy with their work. They re-chinked the cabins in all the places where the first chinking had cracked. They mended the traps, with Toketie saving this part and that from the old and useless ones they were to throw away. She hunted moose beside him as summer dwindled and fall bit like an icy blade in the air.

They were jerking the meat of the last moose late one afternoon when Toketie suddenly halted her work. She laid down her knife, straightened as if with a great effort, and looked at him. There was anguish in her face and cold beads of perspiration on her forehead. He leaped to her to take her in his arms. She put out her left hand, and pushed him back.

"I am a woman and not a child," she whispered brokenly. "I do not fear this thing. You will have to finish the meat. I go now."

He watched her go to the cabin, saw her sway and stumble slightly at the door. He saw her open the door and pull herself wearily inside. She closed the door behind her.

McKenna knew. His mind was a seething turmoil of joy and dread. He went back to the moose, ripping and tearing into the meat with an insane fury. Two hours later he looked up. Toketie stood beside him. All the misery was gone from her face. She looked as she always had looked to him—like some ancient Roman princess, fresh from the baths and her handmaids. She spoke to him softly, with a

thousand little lights of satisfaction in her blue-black eyes.

"There is a man-child in the cabin." She said it simply. Save for those dancing lights in her eyes, she might have been telling him that food was cooked and on the table. "He is of your body and mine. Toketie is proud to have given you a son as our first-born. Toketie will give you one more and no more. Four mouths are enough for my man to feed."

And then, without waiting for his answer, she took up her knife and bent forward to help him with the meat.

SPRING was two months away when the police came. There were four of them, each a strapping six-footer caloused to hardship, each a merciless man-trailer come to send a man to the gallows in this far-flung empire of the North.

The logs blazed brightly in the fireplace. The old kettle sang a low, sweet refrain on the sheet-iron stove. Little Jimmy lay in a soft bed of blankets on the floor, with a chubby fist in his mouth. Tom McKenna and Toketie sat on the floor, Indian-fashion, with their legs folded under them. Toketie was on one side of the baby, McKenna on the other. Toketie was a silent queen in all her glory. Tom McKenna was making all the noise.

"He's a little devil, Toketie," he was saying. "Look at that fist on 'im, will you! I'll bet that guy'll be stompin' out an outlaw bronc for my Dad down on the Lucky X before he's ten! Here, you ol' cowpoke, get that fist out of your whiskers and look at your daddy! Why, I'll grab you by the beard and—and—"

Suddenly cold air against his back and a quickly rising grimace of terror in Toketie's face and eyes halted him. He spun around on the floor, saw the red-coated figure in the doorway. The round, black

hole in the muzzle of a heavy service revolver stared him in the face.

A merciless voice came to him then:

"Put up your hands, McKenna!"

The others appeared then, parkas thrown back, red coats showing, service revolvers ready. McKenna scrambled to his feet. He noticed that only one of the men had not drawn his revolver. He stood there with his hands up. Toketie had snatched up Jimmy, blankets with him, and had backed into a corner, with the child tightly held to her bosom and her black eyes shining.

"Keep those hands up, McKenna," ordered the man who had spoken in the doorway. "And turn around. We will not take chances with a killer like you."

Somebody came forward when McKenna turned his back to the door. Expert hands swept over him, searching him thoroughly but quickly. McKenna felt his skinning knife slipped from its sheath. There was no other weapon. His old .45 hung on a nail in the wall. Two rifles hung over the door.

"It's all right," said the man who had done the searching. "You may sit down in that chair, McKenna."

McKenna saw then that the speaker was the man who had not drawn his revolver. When the man threw off his parka, McKenna saw that he wore the stripes of a corporal.

"It's little use, I suppose, to tell you you're under arrest," the man was saying. "The Mounties have been looking for you for a long time, McKenna. You are, to put it mildly, a slippery fish. I've broken a thousand miles of trail on your account."

"Sorry, Mountie." McKenna's voice was calm. "I never had a chance, and I knew it. That's why I left Montana."

"I'm Corporal Braille, McKenna. The man who threw down on you is Jeever. The one to his left is Matlocke, and the

other gentleman is Parkhill. You might put the irons on him, boys."

Jeever came forward with the handcuffs. Matlocke produced a long, bright steel chain. They were taking no chances. In a minute McKenna had been handcuffed and chained. Jeever looked at Toketie, and spoke gruffly.

"Squaw man, eh, McKeever? Damned pretty, if I must say it, old top. Who's the father of the brat?"

"That will do, Jeever!" snapped Braille. "McKenna has submitted peacefully—so far, at least."

"Yes, that will be plenty of that!" Furious, almost uncheckable rage had suddenly come to McKenna. "Treat that woman with respect, Jeever, or I'll get up and tear your God damned head off, red coat on your damned back or no damned red coat!"

"That will do, McKenna." Braille was again speaking in that quiet voice of his. "There is little use in quarrelling, old man. It is our duty to take you down to Fort Smith. I will see that you are treated with the same consideration that you show us."

McKenna liked that Mountie almost instantly. He soon found that it was not going to be a hard matter to like Matlocke and Parkhill, but Jeever was something he would never stomach. There was too much arrogance about the man, with his high-bridged hook of a nose, the long, gangling neck and the mere button of a chin. The man had the body and shoulders of a real man, all right, but his neck was too much like a crane's and his head a little too damned suggestive of a lop-sided pumpkin raised on a dry hillside. He could have told Jeever several things about doubtful parentage of the wart hog variety.

But Toketie came to the rescue. There was something damned calm about the woman. McKenna saw Jeever watching

her with a queer, half-mirthful gleam in his little, round dots of blue-clay eyes. Corporal Braile must have seen it. He got up, nodded to Jeever, and the man followed him out of the cabin. When they came back, Jeever had the look of a man who had been roundly and thoroughly dressed down. He sat down and tried to make himself agreeable.

Toketie was busy with the stove. Soon she was placing a hot meal on the table. Jeever hesitated, mumbled something and glanced at Parkhill. Braile unfastened McKenna's chain, and helped him with his chair to the table. In this frozen hell of the North no man would be foolish enough to refuse good, hot food when opportunity afforded the pleasure of eating.

SITTING at the table with these men did something to Big Tom McKenna. He started to talk to Corporal Braile. Soon it was as though he did not know another man in the world existed. He started at the beginning. He told the man everything that had happened to him. It was not a nice story, but he told it grimly, and Braile interrupted him no less than thirty times to ask questions.

"I tell you—" McKenna was pounding the table furiously with his manacled hands as he finished—"a man I had known for three years swore on the stand that it was me who ran from old Mark Hammond's saddle store that night in Cougar Pass! Another man swore he saw me go into the store. It was no frame-up on their part. Damn it, they thought they were telling the truth!"

It silenced them all for a long minute. McKenna glanced at Toketie, standing against the wall, with Jimmy in her arms. For the first time since he had known her, Toketie was crying, the slow tears slipping down her golden cheeks. He started to stand up. A voice in the doorway halted him.

"A long tale and a sad one, McKenna. I could not have told it better, myself. Sit still, you damned Mounties! I know your breed—a much-tooted gang of damned jackasses. I've shot enough of you to know how you really act when you face powder and lead instead of some poor, cringing devil shaking in his boots. Keep your seats. You're covered from the windows as well as from this door."

Two heavy .45's were in the man's hands, the black muzzles staring unflinchingly. At the windows were other men, four of them—with guns covering the room.

The man in the doorway holstered his guns. He looked at Toketie, and sneered.

"And you ran away, didn't you, Pretty? Damned nice of you to give me the slip when I joined the rest of the boys that night!"

He said other things, this man without even a pinch of fear in his body, as he stood there in the doorway. Tom McKenna could only sit and stare at him. Save for his own stained face and dyed hair, which he had attended to religiously every day since Abel Lang had taught him the trick, the man in the doorway might have been his own image. The man must have read his thoughts, for he laughed and spoke.

"The bad blood of the house of McKenna meets the good blood, Tom. If you haven't forgotten your family history, Jim McKenna had a twin brother called Walter. Walter married your mother's sister, took her to South America to shake the dust of a train robbery in Missouri from his heels, and I'm your cousin Sammy. Why don't you get up and greet me as a kinsman should?"

"And—and you," stammered Tom McKenna, "have a ship tattooed on your chest? And—and an anchor and a star on your left forearm? You cut off Abel Lang's ears—"

"And nose and tongue!" finished Sam McKenna, slowly coming forward. "I also took his woman. I'm here now to take all that money you and Lang got from old Timblewaite. I didn't intend to meet these damned Mounties here, but when I learned that they were on the trail I saw no way to avoid it. Come in, boys!"

The others came then, four wolves of men, dog-dirty and stinking like wild animals as they entered the warmth of the cabin. Revolvers were stripped from the Mounties. Handcuffs and chains soon fastened them together. Sam McKenna forced them all, Tom McKenna included, to sit down on the floor against the wall.

He walked over to Toketie, and snatched Jimmy out of her arms. He threw the wailing baby on the bunk, whipped Toketie's hands behind her back, and sat down on a chair, pulling her into his lap. He rocked her head back, pushed his bearded lips to her lips, and then jerked back with a snarl. A quick rush of blood was on his lips, where Toketie had bitten him with her strong, white teeth.

"You damned cat, you haven't changed, have you?" He slapped her a hard, ringing blow on the cheek. "I'll show you!"

Tom McKenna lunged to his feet. He made one quick, wild-animal lurch forward before one of Sam McKenna's men struck him across the side of the head and face with a six-shooter. He went down in a helpless bundle. When he opened his eyes he was propped back against the wall. Sam McKenna and his men were eating at the table. Toketie was waiting upon them. Little Jimmy lay on the bunk, wailing.

SAM McKENNA was ransacking the cabin a short time later. To Tom McKenna's amazement, he saw Toketie go into the cabin they used as a bedroom. In a minute he heard a plank lifted. Toketie returned with Sam McKenna at her

heels. In her hands was the old five-gallon oil tin that held all their money. Toketie dumped it on the table, sweeping back the dishes to make a place for it.

There was nearly forty thousand dollars in that old can. Tom McKenna watched Sam McKenna sit down and start counting it. He noted the gloating satisfaction in the man's eyes. He looked at Toketie. She had picked up Jimmy and was nursing him as she stood there against the wall, with a look of philosophic resignation in her beautiful face.

"Thirty-nine thousand, nine hundred and twenty-three dollars!" finished Sam McKenna, sitting back and rubbing his hands as he glanced up at his men. "A nice haul, boys, to say nothing of those three silver fox skins—the best I ever seen—that my handsome cousin and the woman who was once mine have brought in from their traps. We won't be cheap about it. We'll take everything."

"And what about us?" demanded Corporal Braile, finding his voice at last. "Do we remain here to make the best of it or—"

"Or do you die?" finished Sam McKenna. "The latter is the only possible way out. You and the rest of your breed, with my dear cousin, his squaw and his brat—you'll all have to die. We'll be a thousand miles from here before the rest of the Mounties find out what happened to you, Corporal. It's our only way.

"When I leave, I will leave you with the satisfaction of knowing that the North has seen the last of Sam McKenna, alias Tom McKenna from Cougar Pass, Montana. Your deaths close all the books behind me. I'll leave behind me the evidence of one hell-roaring fight in which four Mounties, a woman and a brat and Tom McKenna were killed. Your bodies will be here. Cold-blooded, no doubt, but I came North just to be that. I've gleaned a fortune from you yokels. The job in

Cougar Pass netted me ten thousand, but this is better. And, by the way—"his eyes suddenly lighted—"your two Indians, waiting with the dogs and the sleds down beyond the bend in the river, are already dead. We used knives. They were quieter."

It was a cold, methodical business. Sam McKenna's eye escaped not a thing. He and his men made good use of the warm clothing Toketie had made. They gloated over the abundant supply of food, and cackled hilariously when they found eggs in the old barrel under the floor. Toketie, with Jimmy in her arms, was added as a prisoner to the chain.

They went out then and shot the cabin full of holes. In time, other Mounties would find the cabin; Sam was preparing for that. He and his men came back inside, firing all of Tom McKenna's guns, scattering the empty cartridge shells all over the floor. They emptied the Mounties' guns, placing the empty cartridge shells in their pockets for a future use. Then they murdered the sobbing, pleading, wailing Jeever in the front door and placed a half-empty revolver in his hand.

"Jeever, of course," explained Sam McKenna in a cold, emotionless voice, "will be called the hero when all this mess is discovered. They will say that Jeever made the charge, got as far as the door here, while the rest of you Mountie squirts will be found in sheltered spots around the cabins. You will be lying there dead. The Indians down around the bend won't be forgotten, either. Toketie will play her part. They will find her in the next room with a bloody knife in her hand. The brat will shift for himself. When the fires die down and the frost creeps in—"

He left the rest unsaid, and went on with the work. Two of his men went down the river, and came staggering back

with the bodies of the two Indians, each with his throat cut from ear to ear.

SAM McKENNA was reaching down to snatch Toketie to her feet when Tom McKenna broke his handcuffs. He snapped the steel chain as if it had been a pipe stem.

The handcuffs cut the outer sides of his wrists to the bone and sent the blood flying, but he did not feel the pain. He did not feel anything. A screaming, raging madman suddenly shorn of every spark of reasoning, he came up from that floor like a bullet from a gun.

He smashed Sam McKenna backward, as a gun in the hand of one of the other ruffians roared. He hurled Sam McKenna in the air, with his voice roaring and bellying with the frenzy of a mad bull. He knocked the man who had fired at him into a sprawling heap. Before Sam McKenna could break away from him, he had torn out one of the ruffian's eyes and smashed his face into a bloody pulp.

Toketie came then, screaming and crying, all blood-thirsty savage now. A man fired at her, swore huskily, and was firing again when Toketie struck him. Tom McKenna's breaking of the chain had left a two-foot length of it fastened to her right wrist. A more murderous thing could not have been found. She split a man's head open to the bone, snatched up a knife from somewhere, and slashed his throat from ear to ear.

Blood and more blood! The stench of it rose like a nauseating cloud in the room. Shots roared in the din. The Mounties had come up, doing what they could, taking any chance now.

A screaming, twisting and writhing monster on the floor, floundering about like a blind fish out of water, Sam McKenna was out of the fight. Another man lay dead, where Toketie had killed him.

The Mounties, still chained together, had seized the third ruffian.

Tom McKenna, still screaming like a madman, had the fourth man's head locked under his arm and was twisting it upward. He saw the fifth man dart out from somewhere. Through the haze of gunsmoke and damnation, he saw Toketie, saw cold black dots as bitter as the eyes of a fighting snake glinting behind a big six-shooter she had picked up.

There was a roaring gush of fire licking across the room. Something struck Tom McKenna. He went down, with a powerful arm still locked around the head he was twisting. He heard a grunt, a sob. A rush of blood filled his eyes. A second man whom Toketie had killed came crashing down on top of him. The neck of the head he was twisting snapped, and the scene grew a little hazy.

Then he found himself in a chair, with Toketie bathing his face in icy water. It was quiet now, save for the crying of Jimmy on the bunk and the snarling and cursing of Sam McKenna. The killer sat against the wall, with a cold rag tied over his eyes and his wrists handcuffed behind him. The Mounties were flouncing about in the wreckage and carnage. Toketie started bandaging Tom McKenna's big wrists and stopping the flow of blood.

A LONG night passed. The morning broke sharply, clear and still. Two big dog sleds stood in front of the cabin, loaded with dead men and prisoners.

Tom McKenna stood in the doorway and watched the last of the work. Toketie stood beside him, with Jimmy in her arms, a quiet woman ready to break trail or face any hardship that came to her man. Corporal Braile finished cinching a last moosehide strap in place on the last sled. He came back to Tom McKenna, and stood there looking at him for a long time. Slowly, he thrust out his hand.

"Thank you a lot, Tom." A grim smile played about the corners of his ample mouth. "Stranger things than this have been written into the history of the North. I will personally take care of the Montana matter for you. Later we may want you as a witness. Just now, old man, I welcome you and Toketie and your Jimmy as citizens of a very cold, very harsh country, but a country where justice will find a way."

He was gone a minute later. McKenna watched them go, heard the raving and cursing of the blinded Sam McKenna die away in the distance. He saw the sleds vanish around the bend in the river. He turned and looked at Toketie. For the second time since he had known her, Toketie was crying, leaning wearily against the jamb of the frost-covered door. She spoke as if to herself.

"In the spring when the ice goes, you, too, will be going. Toketie will remain here, Toketie will be waiting. If your heart warms, you will know where to find me."

"Toketie!" He slipped to his knees, clasping her in his arms. "In the spring when the ice goes, I will go, yes. With me will go Toketie and my son. The first preacher or priest will tie a sensible knot, after the way of my people. We will visit Montana and the old range. Before the snow flies we'll be coming home, back here to the cabins and the valley. I could no more do without you than I could sprout wings and fly."

Silence held them for a long, long time after that, the cold white silence of the North, winter-locked and dead still, the snow stretching up and up on either side of the valley to meet the frosty blue rim of the horizon. He picked her up at last. He carried her back into the warmth of the cabin, and gently closed the door behind them to shut out the cold.

A frontier peddler leads a posse to sixgun justice—a Horn Hooker novelette



Then Horn Hooker was whirling aside and pivoting. . . . He shot twice.

By BART CASSIDY
(Author of "Nester's Renegade Posse," etc.)



HORN HOOKER'S tired team set its own leisurely pace up the long grade, tails switching at flies. In the rig, the Smoke Drummer slouched, with his chin on his chest, his mouth open

GUNSMOKE FOR SALE

One sweeping, gun-flaming raid by bank robbers smashed the town of Whiterock—left its citizens impoverished, its sheriff discredited, and Horn Hooker, the cigar salesman, without a market. . . . But the Smoke Drummer's first thumb rule of salesmanship was to fight for his business—even with the guns that kill!



and strident snores shaking him. At last the hungry wagon broncs hit the top and, scenting the promise of hay ahead, broke into an easy trot down the slant leading into Holster Valley. And the rotund little man roused, gathered up the lines and

looked down upon the town of Whiterock. He was alert and interested now, and all sleep was gone from him.

Whiterock was a typical cowland county seat. It was not any worse than most, nor yet any better. A weathered scat-

teration of log dwellings reached back from the twin lines of false-fronted establishments that made up the business district. A gray stone bank, a red brick courthouse and a steepled church stood out like aliens in the ruck of lesser buildings. Horn Hooker smiled with anticipation. Towns with stone banks, brick courthouses and steepled churches usually went for the Hooker Brothers' line of cigars and tobaccos in a big way. White-rock looked like no exception to the rule—from a distance.

The sun was down, and the chill of evening was seeping into the bottoms when the Smoke Drummer whirled to the foot of the grade, crossed the log-floored bridge over the Clearwater River and clattered bravely into town. His keen eyes searched the rows of buildings for sight of a stable for his team and a restaurant for his own comfort.

"A grained horse makes friendly driving," he had been heard to say. "And a well fed drummer outsells a dyspeptic."

But, as so often happened, Horn Hooker was fated to give over thoughts of comfort in the face of sterner realities. He had spotted the stable, at the far end of the main stem, and was lazing toward it when his nerves were jarred by a gunshot. It was muffled and echoless behind walls, but a gunshot for all that. And, by all the rules of the game he knew so well, a gunblast spelled trouble.

The sense of that trouble was very clear now. Wanted sounds diminished. A tiny piano's brisk melody tailed into abrupt silence. Someone cried faintly from a distance. And a heavy voice called peremptorily:

"What's that? Sounded like trouble in the bank!"

Boots pounded hollowly on the walks as men edged toward the bank. Horn Hooker, his eyes just a little brighter than usual, reined the team to one side, pulled them to a halt and unholstered the

big .45 that lay on the seat beside him. Somewhere a door banged, a man hollered and a gun blared. Others were answering. A piercing yell struck through the rising din. Then came the swift tattoo of hoofbeats.

A sudden grin splashed across Horn Hooker's gray eyes. At that precise moment a half dozen riders whirled out of a side street, hanging low and far over as they took the corner. They came swiftly, guns palmed and spitting. As they faced the West, the light struck their reckless, flashing eyes.

From the foremost came a harsh command: "Back, you coyotes! Hunt your holes before we burn you down!"

EVEN as the rider hollered, his weapon spoke. A running townsman screamed, spun and toppled. The thing was as merciless as it was sudden. Horn Hooker rose in his rig, his big eyes full of dull fire.

"The dirty butcher!" he snarled, and swung up his piece.

A bullet crashed through the top of his rig. His nervous ponies, trembling with fear of the fusillade, started suddenly, throwing the Smoke Drummer off balance as he fired. He missed the leader, but nailed the man riding at his flank. That one folded over the horn and was whirled away with the rest. The band was vanishing into the river coverts before the stunned town rallied from the shock of the sudden lawless stroke.

Horn Hooker did no more shooting, having all he could do to quiet his terrified team. He had placed the broncs in stalls at the barn, and emerged to the seething street, before he learned what he had already suspected.

"Bank's robbed!" an hysterical townsman told him. "Cleaned out! They got better'n forty thousand dollars, includin' a cool thousand uh mine. Cashier's dead an' the teller dyin'. Believe me, brother,

if Sheriff Thad Cullon don't overtake them robbers, this town goes on lean rations fer the winter. Cripes!"

"Who was it?" asked the Smoke Drummer idly. "Anybody know?"

"It's the outfit knowed as Hell's Rimrockers. They've spawned a heap uh hell around the Holster country, but this is the fust time they've hit Whiterock. Sorta caught us with our britches down. Hell, I don't know what I'm gonna do for money, stranger."

"Smoke this," said Horn Hooker, jamming a cigar in his mouth. "Hooker Brothers' finest—the Shotgun Express. Smoke it, my friend, and feel peace dull the edge of your disappointment. If you like the cigar, tell your friends; if not, tell me and I'll find a brand for your taste. The great rank and file of particular smokers know me as Horn Hooker—public benefactor. See you later."

Having delivered this recommendation for his products, the jaunty drummer moved along the walk toward the mob at the bank entrance. He had reached the edge of that milling crowd when a lane opened to permit the exit of two men carrying a stretcher, upon which lay a pallid, unconscious man. Behind them came a tall, angular fellow with drooping mustache and a star upon his vest.

"Maury Snell," he said, in answer to a query. "Hit mighty bad. Looks like Brice Armer is dead. An' there ain't a Chinaman's chance fer Maury. Old Doc Snapper ain't back yet from Pocatello, an' there ain't a man in this town that knows a thing about medicine."

"Take him up to the doctor's office," sang out Horn Hooker, "and I'll look at his hurts."

The sheriff wheeled to look across the crowd. "You a doctor?" he demanded.

"I'm a specialist," evaded the Smoke Drummer. "An' I don't see no stampede of gents anxious to work on the patient."

Leave him to me and you get out after them that did it."

THE lawman dropped his eyes, shaking his head in puzzlement. Horn Hooker studied his gaunt face and troubled attitude. "Inaction won't do, Cullon," he said. "To waste the people's time like this is a confession of conspiracy."

The man flushed. "I'll handle Whiterock, stranger. . . ."

"Then handle it, Cullon! Don't stand there mooning. Put fire under your tail an' get a posse on the trail."

"What's the use?" cried the worried official. "Night's on us. An' Hell's Rimrockers leave a trail a man can't foller in daytime, let alone darkness. . . ."

"Don't talk so much, Thad Cullon!" barked a deep voice, and a tall, leonine man elbowed his way through the crush. "This doctor's right. You go after the outlaws and let him handle poor Maury Snell. Boys, take the teller up to Doc Snapper's office and stand by for Doc—er. . . ." His eyes sought Horn Hooker's quizzically.

"Hooker," said the drummer. "Horn Hooker."

"Glad to meet you, Doc," smiled the man. "I'm Jake Christy, boss of the J C Connected an' largest single depositer in the Whiterock Bank. I was interested in your words, an' agree with you perfect. Sheriff Thad Cullon better nab them hellacious Rimrockers, or we'll have to get a new sheriff. . . . C'mon, I'll go up an' help you get into Snapper's office. He's another old fossil that will be better out of Whiterock. Mebby I can interest you in startin' a practice here."

On and on, Christy prattled as he stepped along the walk at Horn Hooker's side, on their way behind the stretcher. Casting a glance back, the Smoke Drummer saw the harried sheriff going about the business of forming a posse—a ges-

ture the townsmen had by now come to demand. And he wondered whether the lawman's long face and crushed demeanor were sincere—or masked some hidden interest.

They tramped up an outside staircase into a hallway, where Jake Christy put his burly shoulder to a locked door and burst it in. Horn Hooker strode into Doc Snapper's operating room, peeling off his coat, ordering that the unconscious man be laid on a table. He made haste to cleanse his hands with water and soap.

"Leave him to me," he told them, as he washed. "The fewer folks in here, the better."

"You boys go downstairs," ordered Christy. "I'll stay."

As he wiped his hands, Horn Hooker looked at the man with an abrupt, chill interest. "I notice," he said, his indifference shading off to a faint echo of dislike, "that you don't take a hint, Christy."

"I notice," replied the rancher, "that you don't have any instruments. You're no doctor, Hooker."

"I'm a specialist, my friend," answered the Smoke Drummer, with repressed impatience. "And I have a wounded man on my hands." He was taking the teller's pulse. "Mebby a dying man."

"Lives are cheap, Hooker," smiled the cowman, and his hand fluttered close to his holster. "But pious ideas are few and far between. You're a stranger. Nobody hereabouts knows you. You blow into town on the worst piece of lawlessness we've had on this range for a long time. I've lost a lot of money in this robbery. I don't propose to kiss that mazuma goodbye without a struggle. . . ."

"Christy," Horn Hooker said, patently weary of courtesy, "I don't want trouble or argument with you until I take care of this gunshot case. After that—write your own ticket." He took a cigar from his pocket, jammed it between the cowman's teeth. "Smoke this while you

make yourself useful. Start a fire in that stove an' put on water to boil. Do what I tell you and don't talk back. If you do, I'll throw you down those outside stairs."

It took the man's breath. He looked down upon Hooker, outbulking him with breadth and weight to spare. He was tempted to sneer. But the Smoke Drummer's still and solemn face, the tight lips and the smoldering, fathomless eyes gave him pause. Silence came to him—a silence that was eloquent admission of the hot flame of Hooker's will. Without a word, he turned to fire the stove and to put water on to boil.

HORN HOOKER took instruments from Doc Snapper's cabinet, sterilized them and laid them out. And, with the silent and awed cowman holding the lamp, he went to work on a wounded man who hovered on the margin of the dark river.

In the eyes of Horn Hooker was a feverish eagerness that belied the look of pain on his lips. His nerveless hands were steady as rocks. In that room, with only the one witness, the man who counted his friends by the thousands assumed a role that none of them would have suspected, revealing another side of his many faceted character, writing another page in his book of accomplishment.

In that dingy, darkening room, this man who had so often gone to the deep reservoirs of his frontier training to take human lives, now called upon those sources in the fight to save one. Face expressionless, his strange gray eyes fixed unwaveringly upon his work, Horn Hooker performed there a miracle of surgery. He removed the lead, from a spot dangerously near the heart, staunched the flow of blood, cleansed and bandaged the wound. Finally he called the pair up from the street to carry the sick man to his bed.

"Christy," he said, when he had washed his hands and they were alone again. "You were saying something about my not being a doctor. Go on."

Jake Christy smiled his apology. "We all make mistakes, Hooker. An' I admire to acknowledge mine. You're the cleverest medico ever I hope to watch at his carvin'."

"I'm no doctor." The Smoke Drummer smiled faintly. "I'm—"

"If not," spoke up the cowman, "you'll shore do till a doctor comes along. You can give Doc Snapper cards, spades an' big casino an' whittle the pants offa him. You aim to settle down here, Hooker?"

The Smoke Drummer shook his head. "Just passin' through. From all I see here, with renegades cleanin' out the bank an' preyin' on legitimate business, I'd say there was nothin' in Whiterock for me. Fact is, after I have my supper I'll hitch up an' light out for Grange City. Ought to make it by midnight easy enough. Maybe you can tell me which road is the best—up the valley and over the divide or along the ridge."

The cowman lighted his cigar, looking studiously at Horn Hooker over the match. His eyes were changeless, but there seemed undue fervency in his voice as he said: "The ridge road, by all means." And then he seemed imbued with sudden hurry. He stuck out his hand: "Sorry you see fit to leave us, Hooker. Glad to have met you. An' my personal thanks for your service. Doc Snapper will be back tomorrow to care for your patient. So don't worry about him. Goodbye an' good luck."

And then he was gone, darting outside and down the steps as if he had a train to catch. Horn Hooker stood for a long moment in deep thought. Then he put away the instruments, blew out the light and went down to supper.

More than an hour later he was tooling his full-fed team out of town and

across the Clearwater bridge. He was reacting warmly to a drink, good food and the successful renewal of an almost forgotten accomplishment. It was pay enough for a fruitless trip. The good will he had earned this evening would pay dividends upon his return—when Whiterock had recuperated from disaster.

CHAPTER TWO

Kidnapped Medico

THE moon came up as Horn Hooker topped the grade and stirred the team into a swinging trot toward the forks of the road and the detour to Grange City. The Smoke Drummer lolled back, a cold cigar between his teeth, his eyes bleak and ruminative as he dreamed again of the old trails. Enjoying perfect health and taking a savage joy in his day-by-day life, Horn Hooker was seldom prey to black moods. But that operation back yonder had conjured up old ghosts to devil him. . . . So far were his thoughts from the road that rattling rig, that he quite missed the rising rythm of hoofbeats sweeping up behind.

His first realization of danger came from something snapped through the top and the muted smash of a gun made the ponies leap. The Smoke Drummer started to reach for his Colt, kept always on the seat beside him. With a swift rush, ponies appeared on both sides of the buggy. Pistols were turned upon him, their bores yawning huge and deadily in the moonlight. Behind those muzzles were masked faces, with the pallid light glinting off cruelly reckless eyes.

A harsh voice said: "Haul in, Doc, an' elevate your pill shufflers!"

Horn Hooker hadn't the ghost of a chance. And he knew it. He reined in, with a dismally bleak observation: "Gentlemen, you speak with weighty argument. Only a fool questions the dictates of a

dozen guns." His rig no longer rolling, he wrapped the lines about the whipstock, lifted his hands. "How can I serve you, my friends?"

"We don't want your money, Doc," came a deep voice behind a curtaining bandana. "We want you!"

"Me?" Horn Hooker smiled. "Why, gentlemen, you must be making a mistake."

"No mistake, Doc. Climb outa that buggy!"

"But, gentlemen, I'm not worth a plugged nickle to anyone. Fact is, my twin brother would insist that you send a self-addressed, stamped envelope before he would send you his refusal to pay ransom. Nope, ransom is out."

"We're not snatching you fer ransom," the spokesman snapped. "Get out!"

"Then what?" The buggy creaked as Hooker alighted.

"A little job of doctorin', Doc. If you talk an' act nice an' don't let this sick gent die, you won't be harmed. Otherwise—well, the least we can do is to send your wife an' kids your last will an' testament. Boys, one of you tie his team in them trees off the road. Somebody frisk him fer a hideout." And when those things were done: "Doc, where's your flesh carvers?"

Horn Hooker lifted his heavy chin. "You're a hard man to convince," he murmured. "I suppose it would do no good to tell you that I haven't any instruments, that I'm not a doctor."

"Your reputation has traveled ahead of you, Doc," said the man. "If you ain't got carvin' tools, that's liable to be too bad. The man yo're ridin' to attend is bad shot. It's up to you to pull him out, tools or no tools."

There was a deadly finality in his voice, a grisly promise. But the Smoke Drummer shrugged it off with indifference.

THE man who had driven the rig off the road came back, waving Hooker's black sample case. "Here's his boothill gougers, boys! Le's go!"

"Cigars," amended the Smoke Drummer. "Help yourselves, gentlemen. And you might pass me a few to steady my nerves."

They opened the case, found he spoke the truth. After helping themselves, they let him fill his vest pockets. There was a quick blazing of matches, then the winking of cigar coals and the sweet aroma of good tobacco smoke swirling about the lonely spot.

"I'll have to put blinders onto you, Doc," said the spokesman apologetically, "fer reasons that don't need to be gone into."

"I understand," grinned Horn Hooker. "And don't mind so long as you leave my lips free for smoking."

They tied a neck scarf tightly about his eyes, so carefully as to preclude any possibility of sight. Then he was boosted onto a pony's back and the silent trek commenced. Though the Smoke Drummer's senses were never more alert, he realized there would be no telling in what direction he was traveling. Unless. . . . Covertly his fingers came up to his cigar, caught the edge of that drape over his eyes and pulled.

At his flank came a snarled warning: "Careful, feller! A dead medico can't do a gunshot wound no good."

Hooker snapped his hand away and contented himself to just ride for a ways. His mind was full of a rush of ideas. It was so easy to be mistaken. To justify this further delay in his business, he hoped this strange call was connected with his shot at the fleeing bank robbers in Whiterock City. On the chance that it was, he drew out another cigar, lit it from the coal of the first and dropped the half-smoked weed in the trail. He

smiled thinly as the manœuvre drew no warning from his watchful convoy.

Hoofs clicked monotonously on a rock-strewn trail. Dust swirled upward in the still air. An occasional gruff word passed between the riders. Horn Hooker puffed hard on the banner smoke of the Hooker Brothers' line, lighting one off the other and dropping the discolored butts under the hoofs of his pony.

A half hour passed. . . . An hour. Now they were climbing, the Smoke Drummer taking note of the heaving and straining of his mount. Then they were leveling out. And suddenly they stopped.

"Get off!" ordered the leader, and Horn Hooker lit down.

With a man holding him on either side, Hooker was led across a yard with smooth footing, through a door and into a warm room. As his blind was snatched off, he stood blinking in a lamp-lit interior. A fire snapped on a hearth. A wounded man breathed heavily on a bunk. Walls were draped carefully with blankets, and all furniture had been removed save a rude, pine-board table in the center. At the doorway, six masked men regarded him with solemn patience.

"Well, Doc," said one. "Yonder's your patient. Peel your bark an' get at it. If he dies, we'll bury the two of yuh in the same grave."

HORN HOOKER bowed, his smile a little strained. His voice still freighted with the authority he had assumed in Whiterock, he said: "Spread a blanket on the table, take his clothes off an' lay him out. Fire up an' put water to boiling. An' show me soap an' water."

They showed a willingness to assist. But something in their stiffly grim manner told him more plainly than their threats that they were intent upon going all the way with their ugly purpose, should the wounded man die. But if the

menace touched his nerves, he gave no evidence of it as he made ready.

When he had washed and rolled up his sleeves, they had the moaning victim undressed and laid upon the table. The kettle, hung from a fireplace crane, sang merrily as the Smoke Drummer came to look at this latest case in his sudden and perilous career as a medico.

"Get out!" he snapped at them. "Fetch me some whiskey and then stay out of the room."

One of them handed him a bottle, out of which only a single drink had been taken. Somehow Hooker knew that bottle had reposed behind one of Whiterock's bars not many hours before. And he had an idea that the bullet this man suffered from was just one of many samples passed out with the compliments of Hooker Brothers. One of the masked men was pointing to the side of the wounded man. That whole side was black and blue. And around on the back, not far from the spine, was an ugly purple sack that throbbed with each contraction of his heart.

"Look!" the fellow gasped. "Look at it throb. Gawd! It's one uh them things that's connected with the heart. My old daddy got one in his throat an' when it busted, he died. The sawbones told us then there ain't no cure for it. That right, Doc?"

Horn Hooker's face remained solemn and funereal, but across his eyes was a passing flicker of amusement. The patient was conscious and his heartbeat strong. Undoubtedly he was suffering considerable pain, some bullet shock and the pangs of an awful fear. The bullet had glanced along the ribs and was lodged in the throbbing blood-blister near his spine. Barring the possibility that the bullet may have split, the man was in no danger of dying. He'd be up and around tomorrow.

So the Smoke Drummer was smiling

inwardly, even though a gunshot wound is a tricky thing and his own life hung upon that of his patient. With profound inflection, he said:

"I'm inclined to think you're right. This would appear to be a pulsating tumor arising from a dilatation of a bullet-bruised arterial coat. Yes, without hesitation, I would be swayed toward the aneurismal diathesis."

Six pairs of eyes widened over the tops of bandana masks. Six distinct gasps blended into one.

The husky-voiced leader asked: "You think, Doc, that Slim will kick off with it?"

"He's got one chance in a thousand," murmured the Smoke Drummer. "One chance!"

"An' you've got just the same chance," rasped another of the men.

"Shut up!" growled the leader. "What is that chance, Doc?"

"To operate," said Horn Hooker thoughtfully. "And the sooner the better. If I can stop the blood, he'll live. If not—"

"You'll die. So get at it."

"You sure put me in a spot," complained the drummer. "I should have nothing but the best instruments, an experienced nurse, antiseptics and clean bandages. Fetch me a razor, a clean towel if you've got one and a pan to hold hot water."

Those needs furnished, they obeyed Hooker's order to leave the room, crowding at the door to watch him. First he worked on the bullet hole, cleansing it, wringing a yelp of agony from the wounded man as he dosed it generously with whiskey. Hooker was not in the least afraid of that throbbing tumor on the man's back, but he wasted attention there to impress his watchers. Then he made a swift incision. With a short gush of dark blood, the bullet slipped out in his palm. Horn Hooker rose from his

work, knowing that these were the bank robbers, that the leaden slug in his hand had come from his own gun. He sighed deeply as he applied the whiskey again, smiled at the men in the doorway.

"There," he muttered. "It was a close squeak. He'll live. Get some clothes on him an' put him to bed. And, mind you, no solid food till his fever goes down—about day after tomorrow."

THOSE eyes over the masks had softened a little. Then men came in to give Hooker such help as he needed. When the wounded man was in his bunk, with two-three stiff snorts under his belt, the masked leader came to Horn Hooker.

"Doc," he murmured, "you done all right. An' us boys is plumb grateful, despite our harsh words. Overlook 'em, if you can."

Horn Hooker patted his arm, smiling friendly. "Forget it, neighbor. You're in a jam, an' it was lucky for you that I was around. Personal—" Horn Hooker was thinking about that Whiterock market for cigars and tobacco "—I think I've been well repaid for the service. Now if you'll take me back to my rig, wherever it is, I'll be obliged."

"Where was you headed when we stopped yuh, Doc?"

"Grange City."

"Rushin' business?"

The Smoke Drummer probed the man's eyes, seeming to detect the purpose that lay behind them. This was a game—a dangerous game. One false move would determine which side won. And Horn Hooker, banking on his knowledge of chess men and gunmen, made few mistakes.

"Not 'specially rushing," he said.

"Then you wouldn't mind puttin' up here an' waitin' to see how Slim comes out?"

Horn laughed. "After you threatenin' to cut my throat if he dies? Humph! I'd

be a fool if I didn't mind. But—" he threw his hands wide—"after all, I haven't anything to say about it."

The man's fingers touched his arm. "Just aimed to scare you into your best work, Doc," he confided. "It's like a rider that wears spurs. He could kill his horse with 'em—but he doesn't."

"Well put," said Horn Hooker, thinking about that townsman who had been slain back in Whiterock. "But I can't do you any good here. If you need me at all, it'll be a case of complications. I would need instruments an' medicines, bandage an' antiseptics. . . . Tell you what! I'll go back to Whiterock an' put up at the Clearwater House. If you need me, get word to me there."

"You—you'll do that?"

"If you won't wait too long," answered the Smoke Drummer, vaguely.

And so it was understood. They blindfolded Horn Hooker again, put him on a horse and led him back to his waiting team. At ten o'clock that night he was crossing the Clearwater bridge and entering Whiterock City.

CHAPTER THREE

Horn Hooker—Speechmaker

AS HE came swinging briskly down Whiterock's Frontier Street, Horn Hooker studied the surroundings with a bland, half-lidded glance. The hitchbar before the jailhouse was crowded with horses. There was no one on the street. Only in the garish Hibernian Saloon was there sound of human activity. The Smoke Drummer made a logical pattern of the facts at hand: "Sheriff's posse is back. Indignation meeting being held by the outraged townsfolk that lost money in the gutted bank. That should mean fireworks—and maybe a demand for good cigars."

He turned into the stable, the rattle of

his buggy's wheels fetching the hostler. The man beamed upon him: "Well, you come back, eh?"

The Smoke Drummer grinned. "The ponies liked your oats so well they insist on more. Be pleased to curry and brush them, water them in half an hour and give them a half measure of grain and whatever hay they'll eat." He handed the hostler a coin.

"Thanks," murmured the faded, little man. "Feller's thankful fer the little things after he's lost all he's got in the bank robbery. I hear the bank's gonna close its doors."

"Maybe not," murmured Horn Hooker. "But if so, it's the way of the world. Life's a gamble, and a man must expect his losses."

"Ain't that the truth," grunted the stable man, taking the horses back.

Picking up his sample case, the Smoke Drummer walked out of the barn and up the silent street. Ahead of him, shadows moved where the lights of the Hibernian Saloon threw a lurid rectangle across the boardwalk. Those shadows seemed to float toward him, and Horn Hooker slowed his stride as a woman's sob reached him. There followed a stout word of comfort in a boyish treble:

"Aw, Mom, don't carry on thataway. Don't worry. Daddy won't lose his star. An' if he does, what about it? He can go back to cow ranchin', an' I can get outa town. He won't even have to pay a cowhand any more, Mom! Yuh realize that? I can ride anything there is an' rope an' brand an' ride herd. Gosh, I wish he'd get an outfit."

"Hush, Bobby!" The woman's warning was choked. "Not so loud. Here comes someone." And then she was weeping, covering her face with her hands, as Horn Hooker loomed before them. The rotund, little man with the sample case tipped his hat.

"Pardon," he murmured sympatheti-

cally. "In my busy life I've observed that the troubles of the rangeland fall heaviest upon the frailest shoulders. I have also deduced that most troubles are fanciful and not worth a woman's tears. Might I be so bold as to inquire the cause of your grief, Missus Cullon?"

"It's nothin', Mister," answered the boy. "Nothin' at all. Mom just ain't feelin' so good."

"Bobby!" The woman reproved him, then lifted grateful eyes to Horn Hooker. She weighed him with a casual glance, check-reining her emotion. "Oh!" she said, and tried hard to smile. "You're—you're the doctor."

"Doctor Horn Hooker, Missus Cullom," he confessed, and was vaguely conscious of her neat, crisp gingham, of something alert and vital and honest about her.

She was an attractive woman, trim and slender. And the way the curly hair wisped about her ears brought a long-dead past swirling down about him. For one poignant moment, an age-old, primitive hunger moved him, bringing a morose droop to the corners of his mouth, seeming to accentuate the touch of gray at his temples. Then he had cast off the spell and was saying: "You're in distress, ma'am. What could a man do to help you?"

"Nothing," she made haste to aver. "Nothing at all. No one can help me and mine, Doctor. Anyway, I may have let my fears get the better of me. It's Thad—my husband. The Rimrockers have outwitted him again, and the whole town is incensed because of their losses. I'm—I'm afraid that if he can't capture them, the office will be declared vacant and Thad's salary cut off. If that happened, I don't know what would become of us, Doctor."

"None of us know what fate has in store for us, Missus Cullom," said Horn Hooker. "So, as a doctor, I can tell you

that your worries are needless—and injurious. Folks have accused me of having second sight. Maybe so—maybe not. But I see one thing very clearly. . . ."

"What?"

"Sure as I'm going to sell cigars to this town, your husband is not going to lose his star."

"Bless you!" she sighed, touching him with gentle fingers. "You've already won the trust of Whiterock City. Poor Maury Snell is ever so much better, and the townsfolk are grateful. We will never forget you. Goodnight."

HORN HOOKER stood looking after the woman and boy until the darkness swallowed them. Then he resumed his way along the walk, shouldering into the crowded Hibernian bar-room. The throng, all men, had gone strangely silent. All eyes were glued upon the little rear platform used by the saloon entertainers. Standing at the back of that stage was Thad Cullom—tall, angular and morose, his eyes brooding and shadowed with trouble. At the front of the platform, punctuating his remarks with a hard fist, driven repeatedly into his palm, stood Jake Christy—boss of the J C Connected and largest depositor in the bank.

" . . . an' they come right in under his nose an' cleaned out our bank!" he recited. "Killed two men an' shot up another. Near as we can check up now, they got purty close to twenty thousand dollars. It might run more. At any rate, it busts us all. An' what does our noble sheriff do about it? Nothin'! What has he ever done about lawlessness? Nothin'! Understand me, I've nothin' against him personal. Fine feller, an' I like him. But my hoss will make a better sheriff."

"We done elected Thad," sang out someone. "Suppose you wanted another sheriff, how you goin' about gettin' one before next votin' time?"

Christy smirked, half turning to the

silent lawman behind him. "Oh, I reckon Thad will listen to reason," he hummed. "I reckon we can make him see his unfitness an' resign."

"If the people demand my removal," called Cullom, "I'll quit."

Horn Hooker knew what that admission cost the sheriff. He felt bitterly sorry for the man. Up to that very minute, he had taken it for granted that the sheriff was in league with the renegades. Cullom's vacillation and hang-back attitude after the robbery had seemed clearly to point to that. But now Horn Hooker wondered.

"Mebbyso Thad ain't all he orta been as a lawdog," hollered someone. "But what makes you think we can do better?"

"Anything is better!" barked Christy. "Nobody wants the job, with its measly hundred dollars a month, but I'll serve if you want me. An' thirty days after I pin on the badge, I'll have Hell's Rimrockers rimrockin' in hell. How about it?"

A roar shook the rafters. As it waned, Horn Hooker shouted: "Mister Christy, sir, I'd like a few words!"

Christy started, stared. "Doc Hooker!" he cried. "Thought you left Whiterock? Shore, I'll talk with yuh soon as we finish this business. An' now, boys. . . ."

They howled him down. They were shouting for one they hardly knew by sight, yet whose name was already a byword.

"Doc! We want Doc!"

"Speech. . . . Speech!"

Rough hands cleared an aisle, boosting the Smoke Drummer, breathless and grinning, to the platform.

"You see how it is?" he asked the scowling Christy.

"Quit stallin'," barked the cowman. "Quiet 'em an' get it done with. We've work to do."

"Work?" murmured Horn Hooker. "Fun, ain't it?"

The man eyed him narrowly. "It's always fun to replace dilly-dallying with competence, loss with gain."

"Yeah," grinned Hooker. "Particularly that last, eh?"

"Meanin' what?" Christy was suspicious.

The Smoke Drummer sighed. "We pay dear for our fun in this world, my friend."

AS IF regretting the rebuke, Hooker turned front, commanding silence. And they gave it—eloquent testimonial of Whiterock's regard for this robust personality, who found life good despite the bad in it, who knew no void between friendship and enmity, whose heart throbbed with pity at times—but never for himself.

"Gents," he said, "you want a speech, and you'll get one. . . . This is cow country. What do cowfolks hate worse than sheep?"

"More sheep!" A roar beat back at him.

"Then start hatin' yourselves," barked Hooker. "'Cause you sure act like sheep. Your bank gets robbed. Somebody hollers, 'Down with the sheriff!' an' you proceed to kick out your duly elected law."

"Ain't reasonable," hollered a cowdog, "for a sheriff never to get his man."

Horn Hooker turned. "Sheriff, how-come you can't put the deadwood on the Rimrockers?"

Color touched the man's cheeks. He stirred his lanky body beside the Smoke Drummer, his voice rolling hopelessly. "They ain't human," he asserted. "All I ever see is cold sign—until tonight, when nightfall cheats me. Their trail pitched outa the Clearwater bottoms an' onto the same ol' black rimrock above Bobcat Mesa. From there they fly."

He ceased, shaken with emotion.

Horn Hooker said: "All you folks who

want a magician for sheriff, hold up your hands."

No hands. And embarrassment was running their ranks.

"Exactly," smiled the drummer. "How many want a sincere man who does his sweatin' regardless?"

Hands soared aloft, amid a roar of approval. Hooker laughed: "Fine. An' I don't need to call for a vote on whether you're ashamed of payin' your law only a hundred a month. That's a disgrace. One more question: How many believe in buyin' good cigars?"

Laughing at his hooraw, they elevated. And Hooker said: "You know me as Doc. I'm really Horn Hooker, Hooker Brothers, Cigars and Smoking Tobacco, Cheyenne, Wyoming. I'm a smoke drummer. Smoke with Hooker and smoke right."

"What's the joke?" called someone.

Hooker grinned. "I came here to sell cigars, folks, only to find the bank robbed. Nobody buys cigars after a hard loss, so I'd feel beaten here except for my faith that your big sheriff will fetch in the Rim-rockers and the money they stole . . ."

"Hogwash!" yelled Christy. "All he'll fetch back is an alibi."

"Let's lay a friendly bet on that," said the Smoke Drummer, the humor fading from his eyes. "I want to take your orders for cigars—subject to Sheriff Cullom recovering the stolen money tomorrow. No sale if he fails. I want you to agree to pay him two hundred a month if he does what you're believing he cannot do. That way, we get a fair shake all around. One win, all win—one lose, all lose. What about it, you hot sports?"

There was a lot of talk, with Jake Christy leading the opposition. But his reasons were vague, and Horn Hooker met him with logic. In the end, they voted Hooker's proposition. For two hours the Smoke Drummer sat on the edge of that platform, writing up orders for cigars.

Those orders would be automatically cancelled if the stolen money was not recovered. It was the largest single day's business of his entire career.

After that, both Christy and Cullom tried to get him aside to talk confidentially. But Horn Hooker only smiled, allowing he wanted to ride with the posse at dawn. He said that he would give them such ideas as he had in his mind at that time. Then, pleading weariness, he left the saloon.

He was halfway to the Clearwater House when something clipped along the brim of his hat and chunked into the side of the adjoining building. A gun kicked up a detonating crash that swelled like a wave through the quiet town. . . And Horn Hooker's thick-set form snapped into action like a tight-wound coil, suddenly released.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lead Pills for Polecats

IN one explosive effort, the Smoke Drummer hurled his sample case aside, ducked, drew and leaped into the street. He thumbed swift shots upward into a false front, from behind which had come that bushwack shot. And Whiterock saw a new Horn Hooker. Here was a man savagely intent upon taking life, whereas only a few short hours ago he had been laboring to save one. Quick as a cat critter, deadly as a rattler, he fired four times, then sprinted across the street, darted between buildings to the rear.

When halfway back, he heard the bushwhacker hit the ground. As Horn Hooker cleared the corner, the man was roaring away on a rocketing horse. He was speeded on by the Smoke Drummer's last slug.

Excitement reigned among the townsfolk. Everyone wanted to know the

meaning of the shooting. Nobody was able to guess the answer.

Horn Hooker smiled thinly as he recovered his sample case and went down to the hotel. But that night special deputies, appointed by the sheriff, paced the corridors of the hotel while the Smoke Drummer slept.

The first gray line was showing wanly in the east the next morning when the possemen rose to their saddles at the feed barn. They were a score of ugly-tempered men, armed to the limit and rearing for gun trouble. The sheriff was there as nominal leader, but the real leader was an easy-riding cowman whose wealth commanded authority. Jake Christy's voice could be heard, advising, cautioning, planning.

The sheriff sat his horse silently, without enthusiasm, probably thinking of the many similar quests, all of which had proved fruitless. His face was woe-begone. Horn Hooker mounted and spurred over to take the lawman's mind off his troubles. Noticing that, Jake Christy joined them.

"Cullom," said Christy patronizingly, "we'll have to depend upon you to take us to where you lost the sign last night. Trampin' it up thataway—"

"One minute, gents," broke in the Smoke Drummer. "That sign will keep. Today I want to take you along another trail—one I followed yesterday and returned on. I was in the house of the Rimrockers last evening."

It stopped them. The sheriff gasped.

Christy snapped, "Yo're a crazy-talkin' jigger, Hooker, but there's such a thing as too much hooraw."

"Shut up, Jake!" said Cullom. "What you mean, Hooker?"

The Smoke Drummer told them the story of being stopped by masked men, carried away to attend a wounded man and fetched back to his buggy. He left out only the matter of dropping the cigar

butts. Cullom looked dubious and Christy roared with scornful laughter. From ridiculing, the cowman became abusive—until Horn Hooker put him in his place.

"This is my party, Christy," he reminded him. "Go on back with the rest of the possemen. Leave the big talk to me and the sheriff."

It silenced the man and hardened his eye. Horn had his way with Cullom. A little after sunrise, the drummer led them to the spot where he had been stopped and blindfolded. Horse trails led away to the east, and these the possemen were eager to follow. But Horn Hooker looked to the west.

"Sheriff," he asked, "is that the rimrock above Bobcat Mesa? Is that where your sign peters out?"

"That's it, Hooker."

At the Smoke Drummer's order, they swung to the westward in a fan. Their directions were to cut for beaten trails.

"Nuttiest business I ever heard of," grumbled Christy.

But it wasn't. A mile from the roadway, questing possemen found a trail angling through the brush. It was a well-beaten trail, marked with signs of fresh horse travel.

"A hoss trail," said Jake Christy. "The fuzzies use it whilst droppin' down to the river."

"We'll follow it a ways," said Horn Hooker, taking the lead.

WITHIN half a mile, he dismounted and picked up the remains of a hoof-smashed cigar.

"What's that?" demanded Christy.

"That," smiled the Smoke Drummer, "is all that is left of the best cigar made in the West—Hooker Brother's Shotgun Express. Gentlemen, we're on the plain trail of the bank robbers."

"You're crazy!" snapped Christy.

"Like a fox, I reckon," said the sheriff grimly. "Come on, men!"

He led the way at a gallop, Horn Hooker at one flank, Christy at the other. They swung up a grade, over a hill and up to the very dooryard of a substantial ranch.

"Careful, Cullom!" warned Horn Hooker. "This is the place. Here's where you'll find your bank robbers and, without doubt, the stolen money."

But Cullom, who had drawn rein, wasn't looking at Hooker. He was staring at Jake Christy, the lean solemnity of his cheeks deepening. "The J C Connected!" he murmured. "What the hell does this mean, Jake?"

"It means, blustered the irate cowman, "that you've let a locoed cigar drummer lead you on a wild-goose chase that fetches you right to my back door. You know me, an' you don't know nothin' about this jigger. You've swallowed his bait, Cullom. Now let him play you for a sucker. What's next, Hooker?"

It shook the lawman's confidence, The possemens were looking at one another with knowing winks. The sheriff turned solemnly to the Smoke Drummer.

"This is a serious charge, Hooker. Can you back it up?"

"That's the question," grinned Hooker. "But this is the place where I attended the wounded man. Let's go in."

As they swung down, two cowboys came from the bunkhouse, yawning. Another slouched over from the barn. Two appeared in the house doorway.

"What's the rip, boss?" one called. "How come all the company?"

"You name it?" barked Christy angrily. "Doc Hooker has tracked the bank robbers here. You seen anything of the critters?"

"Search us," laughed one.

The sheriff led the way inside, the men following until the main room was pretty well crowded. Horn Hooker smiled. The

wall drapes were down, the furniture returned to its wonted places. Save for the location of the fireplace and the pine-board table, it all looked strange.

"This the place, Hooker?" asked Cullom uneasily.

"This is it, Sheriff. The wounded man I was brought here to attend lay on yonder table while I worked on him. The walls were hung with blankets and—"

"You better prove them remarks, feller," snarled Christy. "If you don't, I aim to pay you off for this reflection on my honesty with a downright good beatin' an' a slander suit that'll bust Hooker Brothers right in two."

"Can you prove it, Hooker?" asked Thad Cullom soberly.

"I hope so," murmured the Smoke Drummer, and he was thinking of a patient-faced woman and an eager boy who yearned to be on a cow outfit. "Sheriff, step over to the table an' yank off that blanket spread."

"Yeah!" sneered Christy. "Yank it off, Cullom. Doc Hooker thinks you might find some blood on the boards."

Horn Hooker blinked, watching the lawman stride to obey. The Smoke Drummer was experiencing something as near to fear as he had ever known. His whole project hung upon one very thin thread. If that thread broke, they'd laugh him out of the country—and likely worse. Sheriff Cullom whipped off the blanket, eyed the table, shook his head and flung a hopeless look at the Smoke Drummer. Hooker steeled himself.

"Sheriff," he said, "from the man they called Slim, who lay on that table, I took a .45 calibre bullet. It was a certain type of sharp-nose bullet used by the police of eastern cities. That's the kind of bullet I was shooting at the bank robbers as they wheeled out of Whiterock. I dropped that bullet into a little knot hole in the third board from the edge and near the center. See if it's there."

Deadly silence gripped the room as the lawman bent over, as he reached for the knot hole—and came up with the blood-darkened slug.

SUDDENLY the hush was broken by Jake Christy's roar: "He's a dirty liar! It's a trick!"

He halted, knowing how futile his words were. He did not wait. Forced to choose in a split second between the horror of the rope and the gamble of the gun, he struck at his weapon, his harsh war cry lifting:

"Shoot your way out, boys, or swing! An' yo're first, Hooker!"

"Stand hitched!" bawled Horn Hooker, undergoing in that instant an amazing metamorphosis. Normally soft-spoken, his warnings were always plain enough and loud enough so there could be no possibility of mistake. And now, with the warning being disregarded, he changed lightning-quick from an embarrassed man to a human tiger.

To the stunned and unprepared possemen, it seemed the Smoke Drummer's draw was hopelessly behind Christy's. Yet the cowman's desperate dive for his pistol was a futile thing compared with that of the rotund drummer of smoke. Christy's gun was hardly clear when Horn Hooker shot him through the body, dropping him.

Then Horn Hooker was whirling aside and pivoting, to cover a darting cowpuncher who was lifting to drill the sheriff. He shot twice, smashing the fellow down in his tracks. A bullet nicked his arm, spinning him around—with his pistol spitting death at the one who had targeted him.

Sheriff Cullom, after the first stunning surprise, had jerked his iron and was aiming with terrible deliberation as he bawled an order for the fugitives to stop.

The possemen were coming to life. For a second the room rocked to the awful welter of gun sound. Then all the renegades were but huddled figures, silent and shapeless.

As the echoes ran out to silence, Horn Hooker's voice sounded, calm and unruffled.

"I was out on a limb, gents," he confessed, "until Jake Christy made the mistake of talking too much."

He passed out cigars from his bulging pockets, then led the hunt for the stolen money. It took them most of the day to unearth it—in the haymow. And they found the frightened, feverish Slim with it. The wounded renegade made a clean breast of the matter, confessing that Christy had sold his cattle and outfit and was preparing to clear out with the loot.

And so it was that Horn Hooker sent to his home office the biggest single batch of orders ever to go in from one town. Sheriff Cullom held his job, with a hundred dollar raise; and the people of Whiterock celebrated the return of money they had hopelessly kissed goodbye. "Doc," as they insisted upon calling the Smoke Drummer, was the center of the celebration. And when he drove out, heading for whatever the fates held in Grange City, the most enthusiastic of those bidding him Godsped was a slender little woman, who stood at the sheriff's side. And a wan-faced bank teller, who insisted upon being helped to the window to see his hero pass.

Horn Hooker's eyes were moisture-blurred, as he waved to them all. Strange admixture of the grim and the sentimental, was Horn Hooker, the Smoke Drummer, as he shaped the destinies of range men in the smoke of good cigars—and sixguns.

THE END

THE DESERT'S LIVING DEAD



Snarling like a cornered cat, Strom grabbed for the gun Bill held.

By GUNNISON STEELE

(Author of "The Law Rides to Exile," etc.)

Manacled together, afoot in the middle of San Simon's burning sands, two desperate, death-sworn enemies—lawdog and killer—played out their strings. . . . For, if either one showed weakness, both must die!

OLD BILL TYBEE knew that Death was reaching out its grisly hands for him. He'd never be able to make it across the blazing, heat-blasted sink. He'd never get his handcuffed prisoner back to San Simon to hang. Bill Tybee knew that.

Bart Strom must have guessed it, too. A look of triumph lurked in the big, buck-toothed killer's eyes as he twisted his massive bullet head around to stare back at the wiry, gray-bearded old sheriff.

Just two things kept Bart Strom from stopping and breaking the pint-sized lawman in two with his powerful hands—the gun in Bill's hand, and the grim determination in Bill's squinty, pain-haunted eyes.

But now Bart Strom sensed that the little bulldog of a sheriff couldn't hold out much longer. Bart stopped, held up his manacled wrists.

"You ready to unlock these cuffs and give me that gun?" he grinned.

Bill Tybee shook his grizzled head doggedly. "Keep walkin', Strom," he ordered flatly.

"You're licked, lawdog, and you know it. Unlock these cuffs, and I'll treat you white. I'll get you across this pit uh hell and close enough to San Simon so you can make it."

"You're lyin', Strom," Bill Tybee said through dry, cracked lips. "You'd put a bullet through me, or leave me here in the desert to die and rot. . . . No, Strom. I swore I'd take you back to San Simon and watch you swing for murderin' old Sam Barlow. I aim to do it!"

Bart Strom spat calmly into the sand. "I won't hang!" he said. "That gun ain't gonna help you much longer, half-pint. You might as well admit you're licked, and save us both a lot uh trouble and misery."

"Start walkin', Strom!"

TWO tiny specks in that sere, waterless sink of yellow sand and sun-twisted cacti, they trudged on. Bill Tybee was reeling with weariness and pain. Each step sent excruciating waves of agony surging upward into his body from the bullet wound just above his knee. The savage heat was making his brain reel.

The runty sheriff had gone through hell to get Bart Strom, and he had no intention of letting the buck-toothed killer escape the gallows. Strom was wanted in this part of the state for various crimes, ranging from theft to murder. But Bill Tybee, as he fought his way back across the blazing sink, wasn't thinking about those old crimes, nor of the \$5,000 reward that was on Bart Strom's shaggy head. He was thinking about the latest charge against Strom—the brutal torture and murder of old Sam Barlow, who'd owned a little outfit out on the desert a few miles from San Simon.

The killer had used a hot branding

iron on the old rancher, to force him to reveal the hiding place of the money he was reputed to keep at his cabin. After old Sam, breaking under the brutal torture, had revealed where the money was hidden, Bart Strom had shot him down in cold blood. . . . But Sam Barlow had lived long enough to write on his cabin floor in his own blood the name of Bart Strom.

Sheriff Bill hadn't recruited a posse to take the trail of the killer. He'd wanted that job for himself. It happened that Sam Barlow had been the best friend Bill Tybee ever had. For a good many years, when both were younger and wilder, they'd been partners, riding and fighting and sleeping side by side. In later years, as Bill took to sherifing and Sam started an outfit of his own, that friendship had continued.

Old Bill had set out alone, on a tip that Strom had been seen heading across the sun-blasted desert toward the San Simon Mountains. The chase had been gruelling, the fight at its end savage and bitter. It was only after Strom's ammunition was gone, and the sheriff had belted him over the head with a gun-barrel, that Bill Tybee had captured the big killer.

Strom's mount had stepped into a hole and broken its leg a few hours before Bill came up with him. And it was only after the capture that Bill Tybee discovered that a stray bullet during the gun-battle had wounded his own horse so badly it had to be killed.

So it was that the grizzled little lawman, feverish with an unattended bullet hole through his thigh, had found himself afoot, many miles from civilization, with a sullen, murderous prisoner on his hands. Sam Simon lay straight across the blazing inferno of the sink, the way they had come. But, without thought of deserting his prisoner and thereby increasing his chances for life, Bill Tybee

had shared the last of his water with Strom before starting the long trek back.

And now, little more than halfway across the desert, Bill Tybee was tasting the bitter dregs of defeat. Thirst clawed at his throat. Savage pain slashed at his wounded leg, crept upward into his whole body. Fever clutched at him. Fresh agony hacked at his body with each step.

Bart Strom, unwounded, and having gulped most of the water a few hours ago, was in better shape. There was a glitter of sly triumph in his black eyes as he trudged across the desert, with his manacled hands before him. He was in no hurry, for he knew that the runty, old lawman was about ready to drop from pain and exhaustion.

It was a good thing, Bill thought, that Strom didn't know just how far gone he was. Fiercely he fought the pain and weariness that threatened to pull him to the ground. He was no longer aware of the blazing yellow sand about him. He didn't feel the furious heat of the sun, nor the blistering gusts of wind that swept across the sink.

His whole being was concentrated on watching Bart Strom. For he knew that, with the first lessening of vigilance on his part, the big killer would turn on him with the savagery of a mad grizzly.

Bill Tybee didn't try to fool himself. He knew he was face to face with death. Unaided, he could never make it back to San Simon. And the only source from which he could possibly receive aid was the gent he was driving back to a hangman's noose. . . .

BILL TYBEE stopped suddenly. He called hoarsely to Bart Strom. Strom turned, shuffled slowly back toward the sheriff, a triumphant leer twisting his lips back from his buck teeth.

"Didn't have the guts to stick it, huh?" he sneered. He held up his manacled arms. "You aim to unlock these cuffs?"

Bill Tybee raked his hand bewilderedly across his eyes. "Mebbe," he said huskily. "You say you'll help me across this hole if I unlock them cuffs?"

Bart Strom nodded eagerly. "Ain't that what I said? Here—take the damned things off!"

"Mebbe you ain't so bad, after all," the little lawman said. "Anyway, I can't hold out much longer. I aim to take a chance. . . . Hold out your hands, Strom."

The killer thrust his hands out. Bill Tybee took a tiny key from his pocket, fitted it into the manacles. One cuff came loose. Quickly Bart Strom moved to shake off the other.

But he wasn't quick enough. There was a metallic click—and a harsh curse ripped from the big renegade's lips as he found himself handcuffed to Bill Tybee.

Snarling like a cornered cat, Strom grabbed for the gun Bill held, twisted it from his hand.

"That gun won't do you no good," Bill said quietly. "I took the shells from it and threw 'em away, a good while ago, along with all the others I had!"

"You half-witted ol' fool!" Strom grated. "Unlock these cuffs, or I'll bust every bone in your half-pint body!"

"Bust away," Bill said calmly. "But that won't do you no good either. You can kill me, all right. But then you'd be worse off than ever. We're chained together, Strom, and we're gonna stay that way for a good long while."

Suddenly Strom leaped upon Bill Tybee, beat him to the ground. Bill Tybee didn't fight back. He lay quietly, knowing it was useless to resist, while Strom searched frantically for the key to the handcuffs. Strom pried Bill's hand open. Then he searched Bill's clothing thoroughly. Failing to find the key on the sheriff, he carefully searched the sand in the vicinity. He knew that Bill Tybee hadn't flung the key away.

Finally Strom stopped searching. He

regarded the old lawman with savage, hate-filled eyes. He raged and blustered.

But Bill Tybee was adamant. "Kill me, if you feel like it," he said grimly. "But you'll die with me—or else pack a dead man outa this desert on your shoulders. Suit yourself, Strom. But your only chance to get outa here alive, is to carry me with you!"

Bart Strom knew that Bill Tybee told the truth, and that there was nothing he could do about it. He turned suddenly and started walking across the flaming sink, pulling the wounded lawman with him. Even though he still clutched the empty gun, Bart Strom knew he was just as much a prisoner as he'd ever been. If Bill Tybee died, so did he.

Bart Strom thought of the agony he'd seen in the eyes of the men he'd killed. He thought of how horrible it would be to die in the desert, slowly, torturingly, chained to a gent already dead. . . . And he cursed Bill Tybee.

Their progress was slower now, for Bill Tybee was reeling, almost unconscious on his feet. Bill had quit thinking. He was thankful that he didn't have to watch the big killer any more. His hate for Bart Strom, the desire to see him hang for the murder of old Sam Barlow, burned inside him as fiercely as ever. But now he didn't need to worry about that. Bart Strom was bound to die, one way or another.

The sun flayed them with its savage heat. Fine sand stabbed like a million tiny needles at their faces. Occasionally Bart Strom stopped and, by turns, cursed and begged the lawman for the key to the handcuffs. Once he smashed Bill Tybee to the hot ground with his sledge-hammer fist and kicked him furiously.

But Bill, already too miserable to feel the pain of the blows, laughed up into Strom's snarling face.

"Go ahead—kill me," he taunted.

"Dyin' wouldn't be so powerful hard—knowin' you'd go to hell with me!"

Strom jerked the sheriff to his feet. But Bill Tybee was too weak to walk. His body felt numb. Waves of darkness were rolling over him.

He didn't lose consciousness. He knew that Bart Strom had lifted him into his powerful arms. Dimly he could hear the sullen curses of the big outlaw as he staggered with Bill Tybee in his arms across the heat-tortured sink. . . .

SEVERAL hours later the inhabitants of San Simon stared in amazement at the dust-coated, scarecrow figures staggering in from the desert. Two men, supporting each other with locked arms, reeled like drunkards up the street.

Then a cry went up from the watchers as they recognized the two. Eager hands reached for Bill Tybee, supported him while somebody held a pail of cool, sweet water to his lips. Then they gave Bart Strom a drink.

"Hell, they're handcuffed together," a gray-bearded old-timer said suddenly. "Somebody get a file. . . . I reckon Bill's tired uh bein' handcuffed to a skunk!"

"Don't reckon we'll be needin' a file," Bill said.

He stepped close to Bart Strom. With a quick movement, he plucked something from the big killer's vest pocket. He held the object up before his prisoner's astonished eyes.

Bart Strom grunted disgustedly. "You mean to say that blasted key was in my pocket all the time?" he growled.

"Nowhere else." Bill Tybee grinned wanly. "When you grabbed me that first time, I slipped it into your pocket, knowin' that'd be the last place you'd look for it. A mighty little thing, Strom, that key—but I bet you think about it when they put a rope around your neck for murderin' ol' Sam Barlow!"

A MESSAGE TO FORT SMITH



The animal's legs were still twitching in the death agony as Driscoll, using its body as a rifle rest, reopened fire.

By

M. E. CONSIDINE

(Author of "Bullet-Proof Lawman," etc.)

A futile, torturing battle for life faced the blue-coated troops snared in the trap of Red Cloud's rifle-armed braves. . . . One man alone dared break the painted savages' cordon — Dennis Driscoll, volunteer for sudden, certain death!

AMONG the troops engaged in fighting the Indians in the latter '60's and the early '70's, heroism was rare. Most of the really valuable survivors of the volunteer army that had fought the Civil War had returned to civil life; the malingerers, the bounty-jumpers, the draft-sneaks and the worthless remained. These, with the scum of the cities and frontier settlements, constituted more than half of the rank and file on the plains. An exasperated general in the Modoc War was moved to refer to his command as "a bunch of pusillanimous beef-eaters." But there were exceptions to the rule.

At the beginning of June, 1867, Companies A and K of the 27th U. S. Infantry, commanded by Captain E. K. Thompson, were engaged in transporting supplies from Fort Smith in southern Montana to Fort Phil Kearney in northern Wyoming. The two companies' task was to keep open the old Bozeman Trail, the first route through the Northwest to the Columbia River.

The region was a hotbed of Indian warfare. Fort Smith was not far from the spot where, nine years later, the brave but unfortunate Custer and his command were wiped out. Had it not been for the courage of Dennis Driscoll, Thompson's

command might have met with the same fate.

They were on the march to the home post, Fort Phil Kearney, when they were attacked and hemmed in by a big band of Sioux under the direction of the redoubtable Red Cloud. The Indians' first care was to stampede the soldiers' stock, all but one old, blind mule, which, left to its own devices, backtracked for home and came stumbling into camp after dark.

Darkness also brought a lull in the battle that had raged all day. It was a welcome respite for the soldiers, who, fighting desperately, had been barely able to hold back the savages. Completely surrounded, it was but a question of time until death by bullet or torture would be their portion—unless help arrived.

To secure that help, a message must be sent and the messenger must get through. The prospects of getting through were dubious. The nearest post was Fort Smith, forty miles by wagon road. No messenger, though, would dare take to the road; he'd have to follow a circuitous route over rocky hills and mountains and through tangled underbrush. . . . But first he'd have to penetrate the Sioux cordon that encircled the camp.

CAPTAIN THOMPSON called for a volunteer. The first to respond was Driscoll. As the tall, black-haired, aquiline-featured young soldier stepped forth, his comrades sent up a cheer. One by one the officers thanked him. Captain Thompson eyed him keenly for a moment, and asked one question: "Do you think you can make it without getting scared and turning back?"

"I'll get through or die on the way," replied Driscoll. "No man could do more."

"You'll need a mount, Dennis," suggested the captain, "and all I can offer you is the old blind mule. It's a pity his

white coat does not harmonize with the blackness of the night." He waved a hand toward the black, overhanging clouds. "I hope, for your sake, that it will rain shortly. That would help some."

Jack Renchaud, the French-Canadian halfbreed scout, gave Driscoll a field glass and a brace of Colt revolvers.

"Better you follow Trout Creek, so long as she is dark," he advised. "The Injun, she will watch every trail she know from Smit' to Kearney. By Trout Creek, she is the long way, but she is the only way you 'ave a chance."

At three o'clock, in the morning of June 3rd, Driscoll struck out. Getting past the fires of the Sioux encampment was an ordeal that kept his hair on edge. But the savages must have rested secure in the belief that none of the whites would take such a desperate chance, for he stole through in safety.

During this part of the trip he went afoot, leading the mule by the bridle, to make as little noise as possible. Arriving at Trout Creek, he donned his army overcoat and mounted. The rain, which had begun to fall, increased in fury. Within an hour he was soaked to the skin.

He was thankful that the storm enabled him to follow the creek for the rest of the night unmolested. But it was a hard journey, with the blind mule blundering with uncertain step over the rough trail.

By daylight he had attained the base of the Bighorn Mountains. He slid from the saddle and ascended a little hill to reconnoiter. The rain had ceased and, through the powerful glasses loaned him by the scout, he could see in the distance a number of small black specks in motion.

Fagged out and longing for a rest, he was optimistic enough to put them down as buffalo. He lay down on the damp ground. But his mind was not at rest. He got to his feet and made his way to

a higher hill, which gave him a better view.

Through his glasses, he studied those black specks again. A sickening thrill ran through him, for he knew them to be Indians, fifteen of them, as he counted. Evidently they had discovered his trail, for they were sweeping toward him as fast as their ponies could speed.

DRISCOLL realized that there was no use trying to get away. So he rode the mule as far up the rugged hill as he could, dismounted, and sought the shelter of the rocks.

"If I live to be a hundred," he afterwards declared, "I shall never forget my sensations as, one by one, the redskins approached my hiding place and began circling, as is their custom, and yelling like so many demons."

With his back to a tall rock, and the old mule standing sidewise before him, Driscoll rested his rifle on the mule's back and took careful aim. He must make every shot count, for if the Indians conceived the idea that he was a poor marksman they would rush him instantly.

At his first shot, a brave tumbled from the saddle. At his second, another went down. The third shot was from the Indians, and it got the mule. The animal's legs were still twitching in the death agony as Driscoll, dropping to the ground and using its body as a rifle rest, reopened fire. Its struggles lasted so long that he had to stand up several times in order to shoot straight.

The battle lasted for hours, broken occasionally by wordy quarrels among the Indians, who were angered at their heavy loss of men and horses, while they were unable to retaliate.

Driscoll's chief dread was that reinforcements for his foes would arrive, attracted by the noise of battle. He knew that if he were to get away at all, it must

be before such reinforcements arrived.

He beat a retreat to a little aspen grove. Here he suffered the disadvantage of an unprotected rear. The Indians quickly surrounded him, and several times death missed him by a matter of inches.

Once, whirling quickly, he spied a gigantic Sioux not six feet behind him. Driscoll's gun roared and the giant fell dead. Driscoll had an insane desire to scalp him, but he had no knife himself, and he could find none on the Sioux.

By now all fear was gone. All he felt was a wild desire to kill. He had no hope, no thought even, of escape.

It was the Indians who unwittingly provided a way out. To burn him out, they set fire to the brush. But the damp underwood gave out a dense smoke, and under cover of that he crawled away unperceived.

From pine to pine, he dropped down a precipice till he got to a stream, bordered with aspen and willow. Keeping to this shelter, he followed the stream until nightfall, when he struck out for Fort Smith.

All night he traveled through a rough and harassing country. Shortly after daybreak, rounding a little hill, he all but ran into the campfires of a big band of savages. He turned and ran, but before he could make cover a bullet pierced his foot.

His plight seemed worse than that of the day before. Not only were there more Indians, but he was suffering from his wound, from loss of blood, from lack of sleep and food. And half of his original 200 rounds of ammunition was gone.

THESE Indians, though, were obviously wiser than the others. After they had sampled a few specimens of his marksmanship, they concluded that it would cost too much to dislodge him. Shortly they withdrew.

They were hardly gone when he struck out again. With infinite weariness and pain, he won his way to the crest of Buckhorn Peak, from which he expected to see Fort Smith. There he suffered another shock. Deceived by the fact that the viewpoint was an unfamiliar one, he thought he had lost his way.

He descended the mountain and began circling. Presently he was overjoyed to discover the wood road used by the post teamsters. Overcome by emotion, prolonged strain, hunger, thirst, and loss of blood, he fainted in the road.

There some teamsters found him, and in his pockets the message from Captain Thompson. One of them cut a horse loose from a wagon and bore it to Major Burt, the commandant at Fort Smith, who immediately sent a party to the rescue of the imperiled companies. That

rescue troop arrived barely in time to save the besieged soldiers from massacre.

It was six weeks before Driscoll was able to return to Fort Phil Kearney. The command turned out to receive him, and he was borne into the post on the shoulders of his cheering comrades.

Major Burt made his deed the subject of a special report to the War Department, stating that Driscoll had saved two companies from certain massacre. And Captain Thompson, out of his own pocket, paid for a gold medal which he presented to Driscoll.

Nor did recognition end there. Nearly forty years later the former Major Burt, now Brigadier General Andrew S. Burt, made another report, in the course of which he said, "there was not a braver deed done in those old frontier days than Dennis Driscoll's."

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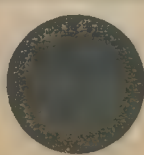
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11

STAMPEDE FROM MURDER



A great sea roared past them and on across the parched floor of the alkali basin.

By MILES OVERHOLT

(Author of "A Fighting Man Is Born," etc.)

Must three die—and one the girl Pick Harrison loved—to clear him of a heinous, dry-gulcher murder? . . . The rising flood waters of a canyon cloudburst said, "Yes!" But Pick saw a way—for one gallows death to save two lives!

SIGHTING along the barrel of his rifle, the dry-gulcher caught the on-coming rider between the sights and held him there. . . . Anse Slaymaker, the

nester, rode straight ahead, looking neither to the right nor left.

He was now less than sixty yards distant. Grinning evilly, the bushwacker

steadied the gun across the boulder behind which he was lying. Slowly he tightened the trigger.

The nester threw up his hands, swayed for a moment in the saddle, then gently slid to the ground. The roar of the rifle awakened the echoes; the magpies hushed their raucous chatter.

Slaymaker's horse trotted down the hill a short distance, turned and looked back at the fallen rider, now a lump of inert clay.

The killer waited for ten minutes before rising and heading into the brush where his horse was tethered—a horse wearing the PH brand.

Mounting, he angled off down a gulch. within an hour he was riding nonchalantly up the Sunnyside Valley.

A cowhand, working for Newt Colebaugh, found the body of Anse Slaymaker and hurried into town to notify Sheriff Dawson.

The lawman took his chief deputy, Jim Hasbrook, and rode out to the scene. It required only a short time to locate the spot chosen by the ambusher for the murder.

"Know this concha, Jim!" Dawson asked, holding up the bauble.

Jim Hasbrook swallowed once, eyes wide. "I reckon nobody else has that kind on his chaps but Pick Harrison," he said grudgingly. "Pink bead in the center of a silver flower."

Dawson nodded. "Kinda careless, too. Look at the tracks."

They measured the tracks then, picked up a few cigarette stubs and broken matches.

"Pick always breaks his matches after lighting them," Dawson said.

Jim grunted. Pick Harrison was his friend.

"I'll pick him up. Yuh take the body into town," the sheriff said, and Jim thanked him. He didn't want to be the one to arrest his friend for murder.

PICK HARRISON was working at the corral when the sheriff rode in. "Hi, Pete," he called. "You lost?"

Dawson shook his head, glanced at the cowboy's boots. "Yuh lose a concha off'n your chaps?" he asked bluntly.

"I don't know, Sheriff," Pick answered. "You find one?"

"Yeh. You got another pair of boots?"

"Uh-huh. In the house. Why? What's all the questioning about?"

"I got to arrest yuh, Pick. Murder."

"Yeh? Who'd I kill?"

"Anse Slaymaker. Dry-gulched yesterday sometime."

"Anse? And I'm supposed to have killed him?"

"Me an' Jim Hasbrook trailed your brown pigeon-toed hoss from the spot where the dry-gulcher lay. We found some broken matches there, it bein' a trick of yours to break 'em; found a concha off'n your chaps; and we measured the tracks of high-heeled boots. I'd like to measure your boots."

"Shore careless, wasn't I?" Pick said. "Come on. We'll go look at the boots."

The measurement taken at the scene fitted Pick's boots. Moreover, a bit of red clay still clung to them. The bushwacker had lain in a clay bed.

"Yuh ready to go?" asked Dawson.

"Yeh. Nothing else to do, I reckon. I'll have to leave a note for Peg Bolton," Pick said, hunting a piece of paper.

"How long's Peg been workin' for you?"

"About a month. Good hand."

They saddled a horse for Pick and headed for town. Pick had little to say as they rode along, and the sheriff respected his desire to think. The cowboy was trying to figure a way out.

Jim Hasbrook came to visit him that night as he smoked and pondered in his cell.

"Pick, I don't know what to say," Jim

mumbled huskily. "I can't figure it no-way."

"Frame-up, Jim, but I can't even guess the answer," Pick said. "Anse and I were close friends—neighbors. Always helped each other, because we were on the same side of the fence."

"Yeh, I know," Jim nodded.

"But I can't think of anybody else who'd want to kill him. He was always kind and inoffensive. Hell, he shouldn't have been killed, Jim."

"Course not."

"The thing is—who'd benefit by killing him?"

"Anybody want his ranch?"

"Not that I know of. Newt Colebaugh kinda wanted to work out a scheme whereby he could use his place and mine to drive his cows to his summer range up on Midnight Flats, but there never was an argument about it. We couldn't do it, because of our crops. So the matter dropped."

"Bolton O.K.?"

"Shore. Peg's all right. Why?"

"Well, your boots were up there and your concha and your hoss. And the dry-gulcher knew your habit of breakin' matches after you light 'em."

"Hmm! I wonder—but, heck, Peg was my friend. He wouldn't do a thing like that."

"Still, you haven't known him very long. How come you hired him?"

"Why, I needed a man and he came along about that time."

"You tell anybody you needed a man?"

"No. . . . Let's see— I might have mentioned it to Nan Bowler."

"I'll bring yuh your supper," Jim said, going out.

But Jim's words had set Pick to thinking. After all, he knew nothing about Peg Bolton. He was a stranger in the country—or, at least, Pick never had seen him before he rode in and asked for a job.

He was a good hand with cows, and he worked hard. But now the accused man began to wonder.

Anybody could have taken the boots and the concha; could easily have borrowed his brown pigeon-toed horse. Both Pick and Peg were away all day and some nights a great deal of the time. . . . But why frame him at all? That bothered Pick.

Jim said, when he brought Pick his supper, "Some lynch talk goin' around, Pick. Means nothing, I reckon."

"Some drunks, mebbly," Pick said disinterestedly.

"Uh-huh. Pick, there's all the evidence in the world against you. How you goin' to overcome it?"

"I'm trying to figger," the cowboy said.

"Dawson rode back to your place and found an exploded cartridge in your .30-30."

"And a .30-30 bullet killed Anse, eh?"

"Yeh!"

"I'm beginning to suspect Peg, somehow," Pick said.

"Me, too. But what good does it do?"

"I'd do something if I were out of here," Pick said. "I'd do me a little spying. And if I then figgered Peg had done the framing, I'd work him over and find out."

"They'll hang you shore as hell, Pick, on the evidence. No two ways about it."

"I reckon," Pick said.

"How long you figger it'd take you to get the deadwood on Peg?"

"Two-three days."

Jim yawned. "You all through supper?"

"Yeh."

"I better come in and get the dishes," Jim said.

"I can shove the tray under the door," Pick said.

"I'll come and get it," Jim said, unlocking the door and stepping inside.

He took plenty of time. As he bent

over to pick up the tray, he turned his back to Pick, who was sitting on the cot. Jim's sixgun was at Pick's right hand, but the cowboy made no move toward it.

"Pull it, you damn fool!" Jim said.

Pick grunted and lifted the gun from the holster.

"Better tie me up and gag me," Jim said. "And damn if I didn't forget and leave your hoss saddled and tied back of the jail."

Pick patted his friend on the back, and then proceeded to tie him up and gag him.

He locked the cell door, walked out into the empty office, stepped outside in the twilight, walked carelessly around the side of the jail.

He rode out of town to the north, to avoid appearing on the streets, then circled around and headed westward toward the PH spread.

THERE was a light in the window of the ranch house kitchen, and Pick dismounted and stole through the darkness up to the porch.

Peg Bolton was counting some money—a fat roll of currency—and clucking to himself.

After a few minutes, the hired hand piled up the dirty supper dishes and blew out the light. Pick slithered around the corner.

Bolton saddled a horse and rode out, headed down the valley. Pick let him go. He had another angle to check up before he tackled his hired hand.

He remained away from the ranch that night. Dawson might be on his trail.

On the hill above Ike Bowler's B Bar spread, he waited until he saw Nan Bowler ride out. He intercepted her about a mile south of the ranch.

"Pick!" cried the girl. "I was just riding to town to see you."

"Busted out of jail," Pick grinned.

"Whatever for?"

"To find the gent that framed me," he said. "Look—did you tell Peg Bolton I needed a man?"

"Yes. He was here with Mel Tillinghast one day and I remembered you wanted a hand, so I told him about it."

"Know anything about him?"

"Not a thing. Why? You don't think—"

"Yes, I do. I believe he either killed Anse Slaymaker or plotted the bushwhacking."

"But why?"

"I know. That's the question. But somebody who knew me well did that killing—and framing. Bolton could do it better than anybody. Anyway, I got to find the killer, or I'm sunk."

"I'm going with you, Pick. I'll help you find the man, whoever he is. I want to help."

"Might not be any place for a lady," Pick reminded her.

"Then I'll quit being a lady—if any," Nan grinned.

They rode down to Pick's ranch, but no one was there. Peg had been back, though, for a fresh horse, his tracks told them. They followed him.

"I got a suspicion that's god-awful weak," Pick said as they rode along, keeping a wary eye out for a sheriff's posse. "There's only one gent, so far as I know, who'd want to get rid of Anse Slaymaker. That'd be Newt Colebaugh."

"But Newt is a big cowman. He wouldn't need to kill Anse," the girl protested.

"No—not unless he wanted to save money. But look, gal! Suppose he is that kinda gent. Suppose he wants both our spreads. He needs them to get his summer range, and he can use the water. Well, by killing Anse and framing me, what a cinch!"

"Both of you out of the way and clear sailing!" Nan gasped.

"Could happen," said Pick.

Bolton's horse was heading directly for Newt Colebaugh's C-lazy-C, which added to Pick's suspicions. So far as Pick knew, Bolton didn't know Colebaugh.

They lingered in the shrubbery for an hour, waiting for Bolton to ride out. Pick wanted him alone.

Then they saw the cow hand pick up a lead rope and start down the lane with a packhorse.

"That kinda cinches it, seems to me," Pick said. "That's a C-lazy-C pack animal."

"Getting out of the country," said Nan.

"Let's ride," said Pick.

"Storm coming up," Nan said shortly.

"You better go back, Gorgeous," Pick advised.

"Not till we get you clear—and from here on," said Nan.

Pick reached over and patted her hand.

"True blue Nan," he said.

"You tell 'em," Nan grinned.

They kept within the protection of the shrubbery until they saw their quarry head straight into Mirage Lake, a dry basin which sometimes filled within an hour. A dozen canyons opened into it, and rain falling in the mountains quickly emptied into the snow caked alkali bowl.

"Shortcut to the Border," Pick said. "You take your time. This may not be pleasant. I'm speeding up."

"Go ahead, boy. I'll be trailing along," Nan said.

Pick spurred his pony.

And not a mile away rode Sheriff Pete Dawson and two deputies, hot on the trail of the escaped prisoner.

BOLTON failed to look back until Pick was within a quarter mile of him. Then, when he tried to get his horse into rapid action, the led animal held back.

He recognized his former boss, and knew he was in for it. So he whipped out a gun and fired three times at the oncoming

rider. The slugs went wide, and Pick kept advancing.

Bolton fired again and again at his Nemesis, but the cowboy paid no attention to the bullets, knowing that only by an accident can a man on a horse do any accurate shooting at a running target.

Finally, the fleeing rider let go the pack-horse rope and spurred his mount, for there was only one way to go now, and that was straight ahead. . . . But Pick's mount was faster.

Seeing that he was bound to be caught, Bolton flipped out of the saddle and took careful aim at Pick. But again he missed. Then a lucky bullet hit his pursuer's horse directly in the forehead. The animal went down instantly, turned a somersault. Pick landed on his right foot, which twisted under him, but he bounced up, gun in hand.

A bullet chogged into the ground at his feet. He tossed a slug at the larger object, Peg's horse. He dared not let his man get to his mount now.

The animal collapsed, and Pick advanced on foot, limping slightly. He had sprained his ankle when he went over the horse's head.

Peg fired twice more at his weaving target, and Pick struggled onward. Then Bolton went yellow.

"I quit!" he screamed, throwing away his gun. "Don't kill me!"

Pick searched him, found no other weapons.

There came a terrific roar then, and Bolton pointed a palsied finger. "Look!" he quavered. "Cloudburst!"

Pick didn't look. The man might be trying to fool him.

"You got a lot of talking to do, feller," he grated. "I want to know all about why you staged that frame-up on me. Talk—or I'm shooting you and letting you die, slow and painful."

"I—I—it—I didn't kill Anse Slay-

maker," Bolton chattered. "It—it. . . . Look! The damn lake's fillin' up!"

Pick took a chance and looked. A wall of water was hurtling upon them, but the thing that appalled Pick Harrison was the sight of Nan Bowler riding like mad just ahead of the vast flood.

He glanced wildly about him, saw a dune fifty feet away.

"Head for that hillock!" he shouted above the roaring water. Bolton gave a horrified glance at the oncoming wall, twenty feet high, and ran for the dune.

Pick limped toward Nan, got her out of the saddle. Half-leading, half-carrying her, he made his way to the little hill.

They scrambled up just as a great sea roared past them and on across the parched floor of the alkali basin. Nan's horse screamed and went under.

"Cloudburst, two of them!" Nan gasped. "Swirled down two gulches at once!"

THE water was already twenty feet deep all about them. The hill's top had become a tiny island, and the made maelstrom of the flood reached within inches of their footing.

Bolton's teeth were chattering with fear. He sat down, because he was trembling too much to stand.

"Talk, Bolton," Pick said then, "or I'll shoot you in the legs and throw you into the water!"

"No! No!" whimpered the man. "Please . . . I—I'll tell!"

He started to talk, but Pick halted him. "Wait!" he said. "I'm taking it down."

Pick fumbled in his pocket and brought out his tally book, wrapped in oilskin, the only paper he had.

Bolton talked.

"It was Colebaugh," he said. "He sent for me—to frame you and kill Slaymaker. Only—only—I didn't kill him. I—I couldn't. But I borrowed that brown hoss

and stole your boots and cut that concha off'n your chaps. Then I took your rifle. But Colebaugh—he killed Slaymaker."

Pick pressed him for details, got them, wrote out the confession, and the frightened man signed it, with Nan Bowler as witness. . . . Pick Harrison was clear!

For a few minutes both Nan and Pick were so happy they forgot about the flood menace. Then Bolton called attention to their danger.

"The water—it's damn near to us!" he chattered fearfully.

The water boiled and seethed directly below them, and slowly crept higher. And it was growing dark.

"I might be able to swim to the other side. It's only about fifty-sixty feet. But that wouldn't do you-all any good," Pick said then. "Our ropes are at the bottom of the lake."

"I forgot to say that Sheriff Dawson and a posse are over on the other shore," Nan said then.

"S-s-signal 'em!" shrieked Bolton.

"It's an idea," Pick said, hauling out his gun. Then cautiously he felt of the muzzle; he couldn't see it now.

"Good thing I didn't try to shoot it," he grunted. "Muzzle's full of mud. Got that way when we climbed up here, I reckon."

He struck a match and looked at the gun muzzle.

"Half full," he said, "and nothing to clean it with. You got a gun, Nan?"

"No. I lost it," the girl answered.

"I'll see if lighted matches will do the trick," Pick said, striking one. It flared out immediately. There was a brisk breeze blowing, and it had started to rain.

"Yell at 'em!" Bolton quavered.

Pick tried it, but the wind was blowing down the canyon, away from the possemen. The sound carried not a dozen feet in that direction.

The rain began to fall heavily, and the water crept an inch higher.

"We're goin' to drown!" wailed Bolton. "An' I can't swim!"

Pick felt of his swollen ankle.

"With this ankle, I doubt if I can, either," he said.

Nan tore off a piece of the wet scarf from around her waist and bound Pick's lame ankle.

"Haven't we something that would flare?" she asked then. "My clothing is too wet to burn."

"Mine, too," said Pick. "You got any papers in your pockets, Bolton?"

"No Nothin'!" Peg said, making a vain search.

"The water is within two inches of our feet," said Nan quietly. "I—I am afraid—we're going to drown, Pick."

The cowboy tried to pierce the darkness, but could see nothing.

"Once it gets to the top, we won't be able to stand here," he thought. "This wet alkali is as slick as grease."

There was a way, he believed, of attracting the attention of the possemen waiting on the other side for the water to subside, so they could cross over and capture him.

But if he followed the only way he knew to get themselves rescued, the chances were that he would go back to jail to pay for a murder he never had committed.

He touched Nan's hand, squeezed it gently, then reached for his next to last match.

Standing on the sheltered side of the girl, he struck the match, touched it to the tally book containing Bolton's confession.

"**W**HA—what is that?" gasped Nan, guessing the answer on the instant.

The tally book burned brightly, a beacon in the night. Then there came to their ears a yell from the shore.

"Tally book," Pick said.

"And Bolton's confession!"

"Yeh."

"Oh Pick!" And the girl burst into tears.

Another yell came from the shore. "Hold it! Here comes a rope!"

It was a long throw, and twice it missed. They had tied two ropes together, a rock at the end. . . . Pick caught the twine on the third attempt.

"All right, Nan. The water's right at the edge," he said. "Hang onto the rope and let 'em haul you in."

"I oughta go first, on account of I'm small—"

Pick shut Bolton's mouth with a contemptuous word.

Nan was sensible. She helped Pick fasten the rope about her. She sat down to slide into the water. Pick tugged the rope three times.

"I love you, Pick," Nan said, sliding into the murky blackness.

Pick waited, heart in mouth, dreading, hopeful, listening. After an interminable time, he heard a shout of exultation, then a call:

"Here comes the rope, Pick. Grab it!"

It was the voice of Jim Hasbrook.

"I oughta go next, me not able to swim an' all, an' the water damn near—"

"Aw, shut up and fasten on the rope," Pick said, helping to adjust the sodden hemp.

He tugged at the rope three times and shoved the cowardly killer into the water.

ON shore, Nan, little the worse for her bath in the icy cold water, was busy telling Sheriff Dawson of the confession and of the sacrifice Pick Harrison had made to get them rescued.

"He could have swum to shore. He swims like a fish. But he wouldn't leave

us," she said. "And he'll send Bolton next . . . see if he doesn't."

So that when Peg was dragged, nearly drowned, to shore, Dawson told one of his deputies to hang onto him.

Someone built a fire in a sheltered cove. And when Pick was dragged to dry land, the three were hustled over to the warming flames to dry out.

"Bolton, you willing to sign another confession?" the sheriff asked.

"Another one? Who, me? I haven't signed any yet," Peg said. "Why should I? I didn't do anything."

"So you didn't admit framing Pick so Colebaugh could shoot him?" Nan stormed.

"'Course not. I don't know what you're talkin' about."

"I was afraid he'd deny it," Nan said sadly.

"You figger you don't owe Pick anything for saving your miserable life, eh, Bolton?" the sheriff asked then.

"Shore. I appreciate it, all right—if he saved it. But I ain't goin' to confess to somethin' I never done just because he lit a match," Peg said.

"I was giving yuh a chance, Bolton," said Dawson. "Figgered mebbby Colebaugh lied when he said yuh had killed Anse."

Bolton sat up straight. "What's 'at? He say that? How come?"

"Why, me and Jim rode up there, trailin' Pick, and when we got right close to the house, why, Colebaugh took a shot at us, seeing our badges and all. Guilty conscience, I reckon. So I had to shoot him," the sheriff explained.

"He talk?" asked Bolton.

"Plenty, when he thought he was kickin' out. He said yuh framed Pick, here, and killed Ranse Slaymaker, too. Said he hired yuh to do it."

"Why, the dirty double-crosser!"

shrieked Bolton. "He's a liar! I did bring him them boots and things, but he done the shootin' and I can prove it!"

"You willing to sign that statement?" asked Jim Hasbrook.

"Damn right! He can't double-cross me thataway," Peg grated.

"Remember, I'm not askin' yuh to sign anything," said Sheriff Dawson.

"Nobody needs to ask me," Bolton said. "I know what I'm doin'."

Jim Hasbrook wrote out the confession in Bolton's own words, and three men and a girl signed it as witnesses.

The lawman placed the confession carefully in an inside pocket. He got up.

"Jim," he said then, "you better take Bolton into town. Fred, you go and get a couple of horses for Pick and Nan."

"Whatcha goin' to do with me?" wondered Bolton.

"Hang yuh, I s'pose," Dawson answered. "Accessory before the fact. Just as guilty as the real killer."

"You framed me into signin' that confession!" Peg shrieked.

"Shut up!" said Jim Hasbrook, jerking the man to his feet.

"Where you goin', boss?" Fred Triplett wanted to know.

The old lawman grinned.

"Thought I'd take a ride up and see Newt Colebaugh," he said. "Newt might tell me something about the shootin', soon's he finds out what we know."

"You mean—you never shot—him? That he never did double-cross me?" demanded Peg Bolton.

"Nope—haven't seen Newt for a month," said the lawman. "But he'll double-cross you, all right. Don't worry!"

Then he went out and got into the saddle.

Nan, now warm, snuggled against Pick Harrison, sighed contentedly, and went to sleep.

Gun-Work for the Wild Bunch



Butch Cassidy went into action. "Owl-hoot aces!" he yelled. "Free tickets to Skull Orchard!"

By ED EARL REPP

(Author of "Wild Bunch Posse," etc.)

A bullet from the night shattered the peace and quiet of the foothills campfire. . . . It sent big Butch Cassidy and his four famous Wild Bunch longloopers on an amazing mission of cold-deck justice—to clear the name of hunted men's honor!

FIVE, hungry, saddle-weary men hunkered about a tiny supper fire on the toe of the Little Rockies. The savory aroma of sizzling possum grease came from the skillet, held over the embers by a tawny-haired giant.

All five were exiles from the range of honest men. Scalp tax among them would have tallied an even \$25,000 for the bounty hunter lucky enough to collect. Many had tried. From the Snake to the Rio and from Winnemucca to St. Joe, a cross

of faded headboards formed a significant monument to the greed and ruthless cunning of those who had sought to enrich themselves with Wild Bunch bounty money.

Keenly alert to the dangers that always accompanied them, asleep or awake, the Bunch huddled about the fire. Their bleak eyes watched the ebb and flow of the embers, lazily, as though they had no care in the world. But sharp ears were tuned to the night sounds. Each knew that greed makes men daring, reckless.

The flickering glow of the fire enhanced the gauntness of their weathered faces, deepened the hollows of their bronzed cheeks, made them look like predatory animals of the night. Behind them grotesque shadows danced against the screening thickets. There, like balls of blue fire, the eyes of their horses blinked from the deep gloom.

Butch Cassidy glanced around at the four huddled about him. He grinned in anticipation of fresh corn pone dunked in hot possum grease, and shifted his bulk to ease his cramped muscles.

That movement was all that saved his life. With a musical *spang*, the cutbank slug intended for his brisket tore the skillet from his hand and up-ended it into the embers. The flat, dry cough of a rifle chugged on the crisp mountain air and sent echoes smashing up the scab-rock slants of the Little Rockies.

The fire blazed up with an audible *whoosh* as the boiling grease caught.

"Bounty hunters!" Butch cracked out.

All five were palming their guns as they fell back from the light and coyoted into the cloaking shadows. There they crouched, like cougars keening the air for the scent of prey.

FOR a long moment, no one moved.

Each silently cursed himself for not standing guard. Hunger, they knew,

sometimes makes men careless. But the would-be bounty hunter must have had the padded feet of a cat to sneak up that way. There could be only one. More would have fired a volley into the camp. Perhaps some lone rider had spotted their fire-glow and had crept up. Still, they couldn't be sure. One member of a posse might have been over-eager and the others were patiently waiting their chance.

Butch licked his lips, dry now at the narrow margin by which death had missed him. His cobalt blue eyes shuttled bleakly from one Wild Bunch member to the other. Beside him, the Sundance Kid's arms angled out, fists wrapped tightly about his gun-butts; his young, lean face tensely set. Next to Sundance, Kid Curry's pale eyes bugged as they swept the darkness from which the shot had come. The Tall Texan, Ben Kilpatrick, stood straight and immobile as a lance, his gun ready, his broad chin undershot with cold anger. Beside him Merino crouched like a terrier ready to leap upon a rat. His bared teeth glinted dully in the gloom.

The only motion about them was the heave of their broad chests. For fully half an hour they probed the darkness for a glimpse of the attacker. Satisfied finally that there was only one man to be dealt with out there, Butch's throat constricted. From his barrel-like chest rumbled the quavering hoot of the owl.

It was the signal the Wild Bunch awaited to send them forward. As silently as quail, they fanned out and began the grim business of flushing the bushwhacker from his covert. As they went, a clammy coldness, pimpled Butch's back, drew his sinewy shoulders into blocky knots. The darkness made it hard to tell friend from foe. There was a chance that Wild Bunch guns would speak against each other. Grimly he regretted giving the signal for the search. It would have been better to

play a waiting game. The would-be killer would have betrayed his covert sooner or later.

Who could have trailed them here, he did not know. In coming to this lonely rendezvous, the band had covered its tracks well. For the moment Butch had thought himself safe in a world he knew held no safety for the Wild Bunch. He felt the responsibility for neglecting to post a guard while supper was being cooked. But even the desperate grow careless at times when weariness and hunger assails the body.

Bitterly he gave himself over to silent condemnation. All trails were studded with danger. Attacks like this had happened before, when least expected. They would happen again. For those who followed the dim trails beyond the law—using the moon for a sun, the stars for candles, luring greedy men to hunt them for bounty money—knew no peace. In every shadowy covert lurked the threat of lethal lead—as one renegade preyed upon another for the bounty price.

Ruefully, Butch admitted to himself that this hidden killer was not without courage. It took a brave man to brace the Wild Bunch alone, even from a covert. In him was born a certain admiration for this one. He hated to kill such. But this was a battle for self-preservation.

He tuned himself to the hunt. The serrated outlines of the Little Rockies sawed against the star-studded sky like decayed snaggle teeth. Across the valley floor in the opposite direction, the Four Buttes hunkered like inverted cones against the horizon. The night was soft, belying the threat of death hovering with silent wings over the disrupted camp.

But Butch Cassidy was well aware of the danger. And, perhaps for the first time since he was a youngster, he offered a silent prayer for the safety of those treasured friends who sided him.

AS Butch padded through the piñon corridors with cat-like tread, guns palmed, frosty eyes probing into every covert, he could neither see nor hear the others. At any instant he expected one of them might mistake him for the foe. And then a great weight slid from his corded shoulders as a guttural shout beat up behind him.

"Here's the rabbit! C'mere, you!" It was the voice of Sundance, freighted with threat.

Butch whirled. Then to his utter surprise, a woman's shrill scream lifted, slashed the night like a scimitar. The hair at the nape of his neck crawled as he ran toward the voices. With a threshing of brush, Kid Curry and the Tall Texan appeared at his side. They converged swiftly on the point. And through their noise, sheered sounds of terrific commotion . . . Sundance's shouts and the shrill squeals of his captive, battling him with the ferocity of a catamount.

As the four barged into the clearing, the Kid yelled: "Claw this hell-kitty off me, somebody! She's takin' my taw an' snatchin' me bald!"

Gun-whipping the bundle of female dynamite into submission would have been a simple matter. But it was the law of the Wild Bunch never to hurt a woman. The penalty was—owlhoot outcast, no matter who. It was a law strictly adhered to. Yet there was something finer than that in the Kid's acceptance of his punishment here. The hell-kitty was clawing him raw.

Chuckling softly at his plight, Butch and Kid Curry sidled in. Their strong arms, gently but firmly, pinned those of the battling girl to her sides. Then at an order from the giant leader, they trundled her to the fire. Her vigorous protests subsided, and she grew quiet in their grasp. Her shoulders began wracking as she broke into fitful sobs.

The misery she was suffering washed the grins from their faces, sobered them with the sudden realization that something was patently wrong here.

Released before the sputtering blaze, she sank down to her knees and buried her pretty, oval face in her hands. Wild Bunch eyes pinched, lips grew grim. Butch glanced from one to the other. Each was gripped with the impotency of a man wanting to comfort a crying woman.

Finally Butch knelt beside her. "You won't be hurt, ma'am," he said with a gentleness that was assuring.

The girl's small, capable hands came away from her tear-drenched face. Her fine, full lips curled hatefully as she looked up. Fear was absent from her amber-flecked eyes. Only bitterness and an awful grief lurked there, startlingly real.

"Hurt me?" she echoed scornfully. "You've done enough! Anything else you do will be mild to what has already been done! I can look for no mercy from thieves and murderers!"

Resignation flooded her cameo-like features. She bowed her head in utter hopelessness. The fire cast a red sheen over her tumbling auburn hair.

Butch stiffened. His eyes shot to his partners. Their faces were suddenly hard, stern, brittle. Awakening anger and suspicion lit minute fires in their sombre eyes. Butch looked back to the anguished, helpless girl, scarcely bigger than a minute, kneeling there by the fire. "I don't savvy you, ma'am," he murmured solemnly. "Just what have we done?"

Her reply came muffled, for she didn't raise her head from her hands. "You're just like all the rest of your breed," she accused sobbingly. "You'll deny that you stole our cattle and killed my husband! My Jim always told me never to fear

Butch Cassidy's Wild Bunch, that under their skins they were kind and understanding; that they always helped small ranchers instead of robbing and killing them. But Jim was too trusting. Now he is dead! I know it! And you killed him! Oh, if only you hadn't moved when I fired at you!"

THE hatred in her voice struck Butch like a knife stab. He felt the impact of Wild Bunch eyes upon him. His fine lips thinned. He laid a gnarled hand on the girl's shoulder. She flung it off with cold repugnance.

The look she gave him made him flinch inwardly. He kept his hands from her, but said doggedly: "Mebbyso you better tell us more about this, ma'am. Looks like you've run ag'in' another Wild Bunch. I'm Butch Cassidy an' this is the Wild Bunch, but you shore ain't ever crossed us afore. We jest come here from over Washakie way. We hear tell there's another gang workin' around Bear Paw callin' themselves Butch Cassidy's Wild Bunch. We aim to find out about them."

There was a distinct ring of truth in his even voice that brought the girl's head up with a jerk. Her tear-drenched eyes were wide. "You—you mean," she stammered, and her face blanched, "that you haven't been to Bear Paw?"

"Not in a skunk's age," Butch assured her. "The word of Butch Cassidy in his bond, ma'am, an' if it's good enough for Governor Goodman uh Wyomin' . . ."

By his steady gaze, she knew he was telling it straight. Her coldness dropped like night before sunrise. She dabbed the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. But they welled afresh as she broke in: "It would have been terrible if I had killed you. But this other Wild Bunch—oh, I hate 'em. I'm Rhea Brehem, wife of Jim Brehem, owner of the little Bar B spread at the talus of the

hill yonder. But you wouldn't be interested in my troubles."

Frost seemed to chill Butch's eyes. "We are if it concerns the Wild Bunch," he grunted. "Go on, Miz Brehem."

Hope sprang into her face. "We were married a year ago," she told him brokenly. "Jim used to be a gambler. But when he found out how I hated it, he quit and took up our little outfit. He bought cattle with his money, and swore never to lift a card again. We were so happy, building our little home. Life was sweet then. But soon our stock began to vanish. Last night the count was down to twenty head out of three hundred!"

"Jim was furious. The Wild Bunch sign was on the rustling. But Jim said something was wrong there, the Wild Bunch didn't prey on little ranchers. Then last night a rider came by and told us the Wild Bunch was carousing at Bear Paw, and that Butch Cassidy had just bought out the gambling hall. Jim took our last money and the deed to the Bar B, and headed for town." Her voice grew desperate. "He went to win back our losses at cards. But they won't let anyone win."

"I became desperate when darkness came on tonight, and Jim hadn't returned. I started for town. Seeing your fire, I could think of only one thing—that you were the Wild Bunch, back to steal the rest of our cattle. It seemed like a signal to me that my Jim was dead. He must be dead by now. And—and I was hoping you'd kill me too, for shooting one of you!"

Her shoulders convulsed as she swept into a new burst of tears.

BUTCH surged up to his full height, fists clenching and unclenching. Tremors of anger shook his mighty frame. The muscles of his thick neck were corded.

Merino's feet shifted nervously, at the account of the Wild Bunch masqueraders. Sundance and Curry stood tense. Their eyes, sharp and bleak, watched their big, yellow-haired leader, in wait for some signal. The Tall Texan seemed taller now, like a lance poised to strike a deadly blow.

This girl's grief and hurt had affected them deeply. And in her loveliness, each saw a picture of some girl who had taken his fancy in the past, some girl forbidden to hunted men. In this moment of dangerous reflection, terrible anger for the renegades who were destroying this girl's beautiful life built within them like consuming fires.

"We're goin' to Bear Paw," cracked out Butch coldly.

Sundance grunted. "We was on our way anyhow."

"To clip the claws uh Bear Paw's Wild Bunch," put in the Tall Texan.

"An' uphold the honor uh the real Wild Bunch!" rounded out the Merino, reseating his guns in their holsters. He rasped his thumb across his cartridge tops in an explosion of nervous energy.

Rhea Brehem surged to her feet. "I'll go with you," she said breathlessly. "I must learn about my Jim."

Butch shook his head. "Bear Paw won't be pretty for women like you tonight, with two Butch Cassidys an' two Wild Bunches there," he said. "You go home. We'll find Jim Brehem and send him back to you. Just you go home an' bake some pan bread. By the time it's done, he'll be on the way to enjoy it."

Rhea dropped her chin. It trembled. "If he isn't dead," she sobbed. Then she looked up, searched his eyes. "I'll go home and pray that you're in time to save him. God bless you all. You are kind and understanding—just like my husband said."

A lump crawled into Butch's throat.

Her simple faith touched him. To hide his emotions, he bent down and picked up the drilled skillet. "I'll be keepin' this as a souvenir, ma'am," he said huskily.

Then she was gone, threading her way through the thickets to where she had staked her horse.

BUTCH did not need to give orders.

Soogans were hastily rolled and stowed away. Almost caressingly, the bullet-punctured skillet was tied to the cantle of Cassidy's saddle.

Then all five were mounted, sinking their spurs as Butch's hand lifted in signal for the start to Bear Paw.

An hour's steady riding brought the guttering lights of the town within sight. The night's velvety cloak endowed Bear Paw with a false illusion of peace and beauty. But the Wild Bunch remembered it as an ugly scatteration of squat, unpainted shacks.

It was said of Bear Paw that no man stopping there was allowed more than one mistake. Its Skull Orchard, on the rocky hill nearby, was mute evidence that many mistakes were made—and paid for in full.

As the Bunch reined into the corral at the far end of the narrow, crooked street, they turned their horses over to the sleepy hostler. For a moment they stood surveying the dusty thoroughfare.

Butch's leonine head drew down on his thick neck as he recognized three men who paused for a moment under the lights of a saloon. Their presence here told him much.

"Remedy Ran, Braggo Smith an' Darb Frisco," he remarked bleakly. "There's three jiggers that shook the fires uh hell when the devil spawned 'em. They ought to be crawlin' on their bellies like other snakes. I'll bet two to one they ain't never got over their ways uh fangin' without warnin'—from behind."

"No takers," grunted Sundance. "Ran's got a split tongue, an' his pockets are always lined with gold he's stole off people like Rhea an' Jim Brehem. Braggo's a human balloon that'll pop when lead lets out his air. Frisco's card-sharped from Natchez to the Barbary Coast on a trail uh unmarked graves. I marked him well oncet. . . . He only handles four cards in the deck—the aces. He's so crooked he could hide behind a pig's tail. Nope. No takers, Butch."

The other three had heard of that trio. It behooved the Wild Bunch to know the country and its men. There were many who whispered trail gossip into Butch's ears. His intricate system of relays and spies—men and women the Bunch had helped at some time or other—kept him well informed. He operated on the assumption that to go blind was to meet disaster. In the recesses of his brain were catalogued the traits of many renegades, their pictures stamped indelibly in his memory. The three now entering the Idle Hour Bar were among those.

By sight, none of the Bear Paw renegades knew the Wild Bunch. But there would be others of their ilk close at hand—men who would kill for the price of a drink or on the turn of a card. Butch had no doubt that the three received orders from some he-coon ramrod more dangerous than they. None of these three was endowed with sufficient intelligence to work lone wolf.

Butch nudged Sundance. "C'mon," he grunted. "Let's see what makes the Bear Paw's rippers so sharp."

And the five headed down the street. When their long strides had brought them to the alleyway between the saloon and the Mercantile Store, they surged through the shadows to a triangle of light washing through a rear window of the Idle Hour. There they halted and four heads converged with Butch's, to

peer in. Five pair of eyes slitted at what they saw. Those close about Butch felt the tremor of anger that swept their tawny-haired leader.

A poker game was going full swing in a corner. Three of the players got up, and Remedy Ran, Braggo Smith and Darb Frisco slid into their chairs—to face a clean-faced, business-like youngster whose eyes were drawn, lips haggard from a long ordeal of bucking the tiger.

"The youngster'll be Rhea's man, Jim," Butch whispered grimly. "An' he's stick-in' like a bad name whilst they play him in relays. Two to one they're toyin' with him, else he wouldn't have lasted so long. It's time the Wild Bunch was sittin' in!"

For the next few seconds, he talked in muffled tones, laying out a plan. When he had finished, he looked in the window again, to study the pattern of red-backed cards being used in the game. Then he slipped out of the alley, made his way to a store two doors down. He came back with a deck of cards whose red backs matched those being used inside. He sorted out four—all aces—and tucked them in his sleeve. Then the five men swung into the saloon.

THE long room was blindingly lighted and brimming over with hushed expectancy. Two barkeeps polished glasses tensely. The three who had vacated their chairs for the other three now stood at the far end of the bar, grinning unctuously. All attention was centered upon the poker game.

Blinking hard to accustom their eyes to the light, the Wild Bunch angled to the bar, covertly observing the players. There was no show of emotion in the fine face of young Jim Brehem. He was playing like an automaton, his slitted eyes following the flick of the cards as a cougar watches its prey. A big stack of chips was columned before him.

At his right lounged Remedy Ran, ferret-eyed, thin-lipped. He played with an indifference that was an obvious threat. He smirked as he watched the youngster buck the cold deck. His narrow shoulders were hunched so that the hideouts beneath his armpits were within ready reach.

Opposite him, Braggo Smith sat on the edge of his chair, sweating profusely. His three chins swam. The play had got beyond him. The stakes were too high and the play too rapid. He couldn't cope with it. But the carelessness with which he played proved that he was shucking in someone else's money. . . . And the Wild Bunch figured it was the money of the fake Butch Cassidy, who had taken over the Idle Hour.

The other player lent deadly menace to the table. Darb Frisco! From his sleeve stuck the nose of a derringer.

Now a giant of a man stalked arrogantly from a door in the rear of the saloon. The heavy planks of the floor creaked under his great weight. He wore the black broadcloth of a deacon. His coat-tails bulged with the butts of twin guns. His pale eyes concentrated on the table. His thick, cruel lips curled as Darb Frisco grinned at him and nodded.

Obviously a signal passed. The Wild Bunch was sure of that. All saw menace in the way this pseudo Butch Cassidy jerked Braggo from the game and sat in.

Butch Cassidy searched his memory to place the big fellow, whom he knew was rodding this fake Wild Bunch. There was a similarity between them that was startling. But there was cruelty in the cut of this man's lips; he looked the part of a killer, suave, deadly. And then a broad grin ironed out Butch's puzzled face as he found in his memory the picture he probed for.

"It's Arch Prader!" he muttered between teeth.

"That's who it is!" gritted the Tall Texan. "It's his picture on that Cheyenne sheriff's dodger instead uh yours. They picked it up at the scene uh the Cheyenne-Western train wreck, an' Bengold thought we'd pulled that job. Ain't he the he-coon, though?"

Color mounted to Butch's cheeks, crimson danger signals that spelled ill for Wild Bunch masqueraders. Sundance gripped his arm tightly.

"Brehem's winnin'!" he whispered over a dog's ear of Monogram.

"They're softenin' him up for the big let-down," gave back the giant grimly. "Men get careless when luck's with 'em. Brehem is doin' too well. . . ."

AT BUTCH'S signal, all five long-riders converged on the table, shouldering the onlookers out of the way. The studious eyes of the players lifted, bleak and uncompromising.

"Only game in town worth sittin' in," stated Butch flatly. "We'll sit!"

Arch Prader's reptilian eyes never blinked as they burned over him. Remedy Ran came out of his lounging position and sat bolt upright, with his hands clutching his coat lapels within easy reach of his hideouts. Darb Frisco drew his fingers from his mustache and dropped his hand to his side. The tawny-haired giant knew that in doing so his derringer, attached to a rubber band, had plunged of its own weight into his soft palm. Jim Brehem, stoic as an Indian, made no move.

Then the he-coon of Bear Paw cleared his throat and spat on the floor. "Private game," he cracked out.

Butch grinned, drew up a chair. The other four did likewise.

"There ain't no money in private games, boys," scoffed Butch. "Three housemen against one citizen! Hell, open it up."

"Mebby the Idle Hour ain't interested in our year's wages," grunted Sundance, baitingly. "The color uh my dough is long yellor an' green."

Arch Prader's beady eyes lighted. Before he could speak, Frisco's voice knifed out: "We ain't interested in anything yuh got. Go away now an' let us play."

The Wild Bunch struggled for self-control. Butch managed it, grinned at the swart blackleg: "I got an idea you fellas are talkin' awful high stakes fer bein' nothin' but penny ante players," he taunted. "Ain't there a gambler in the house?"

"Yeah!" growled Jim Brehem. "Pull up your chairs an' sit. There ain't nothin' private in this game but money. If you got that, yo're welcome to handle chips."

"My sentiments exactly, kid" rumbled Prader. "We'll take 'em to the cleaners an' teach 'em manners."

Butch beamed at his longloopers. "Pull up, an' roll back your sleeves. We're gonna be taught manners by our betters."

"Which same are where?" taunted Kid Curry lightly. "All men are equal in boothill, says I."

A pallor flashed across Prader's swart face. His killer eyes fixed on the intruders. Braggo Smith backed his chair, and his sweat made him look greasy. He seemed to sense the sudden uneasiness of his boss, for his right hand rested on the butt of his gun.

THE tension built up as the nine-handed game opened. It became oppressive as the longriders caught the covert signals that passed between Darb Frisco, Arch Prader and Remedy Ran.

Gun-hirelings, sifting from the groups of onlookers, fanned out behind the Wild Bunch. The deadly stage was set.

Only Jim Brehem seemed oblivious to it all. He was out for the Wild Bunch money; that was all that mattered. And

the pseudo Butch Cassidy was leading him to slaughter.

The deal rounded the table and came to Butch's hands. Absently he shuffled and allowed Frisco to cut. Then he slapped the pasteboards expertly around the ring—five cards to each, the draws at the tips of his fingers. As each player studied his hand there was a stiffening among them. Inwardly Butch smiled. His frosty eyes shuttled from Sundance to Curry, Kilpatrick and the Merino. Indolently his man glanced back, slight grins testifying to their understanding.

Remedy opened with a hundred. Butch raised it to five. The rest chucked in, and it looked like a fast play.

"Cards!" Butch called stridently.

Eight knuckles rapped on the tabletop Eight pat hands. Showdown! Now it *would* happen fast. It was Remedy's bet, with a sky limit. Butch's eyes sought Jim Brehem. The youngster's face was cold, clammy.

Remedy bet eight hundred, and Jim shoved in his stack. As Butch raised it to fifteen hundred, Jim seemed to wilt in his chair. Arch Prader chuckled softly, purringly. His eyes burned on the youngster, waiting, watching. The rest stayed and the opener bet again. The pot pyramided. Braggo's sweat dropped off his three chins. Frisco's lips quivered. The Wild Bunch grinned contentedly. Here was the payoff!

Then Jim's eyes hardened. For a moment he was undecided whether to throw down and out, or go on. All awaited his decision. It would take three thousand to even him up for the call. Impulsively he drew a document from his pocket and slapped it down in front of Prader.

"That's what yuh been wantin'," he cracked out. "The deed to the Bar B! Gimme three thousand on it, an' I'll win it back!"

"With pleasure," Prader beamed, and passed over the chips. "An' if you lose?"

"It's yours!" snapped Jim with a pang of regret and self-condemnation.

"An' all that goes with it?" Arch prodded cryptically, viciously.

Jim looked at him, baffled. "All the stock that's left," he gritted. "What else is there?"

"Her" grinned Prader unctuously. "She'll hate yuh fer losin'."

"Why, you—" Jim's face drained of all color. He half arose in his chair. Butch's hand shot out, stayed him.

"Easy, kid!" he murmured. "Settle after the table's cleaned."

"Yeah," sneered Darb. "Time's wastin'. I'm checkin'."

Hate and sorrow showed in Jim's eyes. Arch Prader had drawn Rhea into the pot, sullied her. Then Darb Frisco's voice sheered through his bitter thoughts. He had been called.

"Look 'em over," the tinhorn clipped, spreading his cards face up. Four aces showed!

Jim Brehem scowled, surged impulsively to his feet. His cards flipped face up near Darb's—three aces! In the momentary silence that followed, the Wild Bunch rose, cards streaking out.

"What the hell?" cracked out Brehem. "Of all the crooked—"

"Yeah," grated Remedy Ran. "Owl-hoot aces! An' the skunk that dealt 'em is—Butch Cassidy! Git 'im, gunies! The Wild Bunch has caught on!"

A FLASH of amazement swept Brehem's face as he looked from Prader to Butch.

"I knowed it!" he roared. "Wild Bunch masqueraders!" And, like feeding bull-bats, his hands darted to his guns.

Butch Cassidy went into action. "Owl-hoot aces!" he yelled. "Free tickets to Skull Orchard!"

The table flipped over as Prader lurched up, guns palmed. His face was pale as the death he faced. There was a mad scramble of onlookers to get out of the way. The Idle Hour shuddered to the concussion of Jim Brehem's twin guns. Before Prader could get in a shot, two blue holes appeared in his forehead.

"Good shootin', kid!" roared Butch, and spun to face Remedy Ran.

His guns bucked in his hands. The hairpin-like man who had posed as the Tall Texan swayed like a willow in a storm, writhed down.

Wild Bunch guns thundered. The saloon was a shambles now.

Through the film of acrid smoke that misted his eyes, Butch could see the huddled forms of the dead and dying. Sundance was at his side, triggering with cold precision. Kid Curry was down, blazing away from one elbow.

Darb Frisco's evil face loomed through the pall, and the Tall Texan planted lead between his ferret eyes. Then Braggo Smith's guns flipped on the tall one. A curse leaped from Butch's throat as he saw it. His guns whipped up. Braggo Smith's wind whooshed out of him like air from a punctured toy balloon as the slugs punched through his fat belly. He clapped hands to his stomach—and died.

With their leaders gone, the gun-hirelings of the Idle Hour coyoted wildly for the rear, Wild Bunch lead prodding their tailbones. A stray slug tagged Jim Brehem. He writhed down, a curtain of blood dropping over his handsome face.

Then the swing doors slapped open. Sheriff Cato Stockton stood there, backed by a rally of friends. His face was swart, cruel. Butch new the type. Renegade lawman! Butch took just one look, and shot out the guttering suspension lamp.

"End uh the line, fellas!" he yelled. "All out!"

The posse cut loose. In the gun lightning the Wild Bunch gathered up Jim Brehem and hustled out the back way. Kid Curry was limping badly, Sundance helping him.

Butch yelled as they hit the back alley: "The lawdog's sidin' Prader! They're ten to our five! The others'll git back their nerve an' come a-foggin'! Make tracks, fellas!"

Like ghosts, the Wild Bunch limped, shuffled, ran back to their horses. The hostler had not yet unsaddled them. They hit leather and were roaring into the darkness toward the Little Rockies just ahead of the lawdog and his followers.

Butch smiled grimly, held the swaying form of Jim Brehem in the saddle in front of him. It would be nip and tuck to the Bar B.

THEY hit the ranch yard of the little spread at a killing pace. The sound of pursuit was in their ears. Rhea Brehem ran out of the house to meet them. Butch let Jim slide to the ground.

"He's hurt!" she cried, and flung her arms about him.

"Just creased an' dizzy," Butch assured her. "He'll come around, with nothin' but a goose-egg on his head. Better take him inside, ma'am. We're goin' places fast! In his pockets yuh'll find the deed to your Bar B spread an' a pile uh money he won from—Butch Cassidy an' his Wild Bunch." He indulged in a dry chuckle. "It'll more'n pay for your losses. Don't do no more worryin' about that Bunch, ma'am. They're washed up in Bear Paw. Now we gotta go. There's bounty hunters doggin' us. Be seein' yuh!"

And the Wild Bunch roared away without a backward look.

You Can't Spend Gold in Hell

In a bandana, she had wrapped about two pounds of the dark gold.



By **KENNETH P. WOOD**

(Author of "Couriers to Glory," etc.)

Untold treasure in gold, lying uncovered on the ground, awaits a finder in the Cuyamaca foothills. . . . Four searchers have shared its yield—yet limitless wealth remains. . . . And the way is clearly marked—by the sun-whitened bones of the hundreds who fell by the wayside!

SINISTER and forbidding is that desolate backwash in Southern California known as the "Salton Sea," a desert fastness which holds the secret key to untold riches.

The famous Pegleg Smith Mine, which has lured many a fortune-hunter and prospector to doom and destruction, remains to this day jealously guarded by the specter of the man who originally

found the bonanza lode. Like ghostly fingers, the sun-whitened bones of the early searchers point the uncertain way. Still, newcomers continue to hunt for this "lost" treasure-trove, which, for more than seventy-five years, has been as elusive as a will-o'-the-wisp.

Rumor has it that the mine was located again some years ago. But, so far as known, no worthwhile quantity of that

dark, rich gold so peculiar to the Pegleg has been offered in the open market to substantiate the claim.

Itinerant desert rats and pocket miners still wander over the adjacent countryside, seeking new reefs or gleaning bits of precious yellow ore in ground a thousand times scraped and scoured. Yet southwest of the San Bernardino Mountains, atop one of the Cuyamaca foothills in sight of the tracks of the Southern Pacific Railroad, there is gold enough to satisfy the most avaricious prospector who ever sought yellow paydirt.

It is waiting there for anyone who will pick it up. It lies in lumps, uncovered on the ground, much of it pure enough to be exchanged for coin at the mint. No lawless desperadoes bar the way to it. No legal prohibitions make it inaccessible. It is not on any Indian Reservation or other preserve whence any man might be prevented from taking it.

To make it easier for a seeker after this Eldorado, it should be known that it lies between latitudes 32:20 and 34, not farther east than 115:30, nor farther west than 117. In order that the hunter may identify the place, these scattered nuggets are on the rounding peak of the highest of three hills, none of which is particularly hard to climb.

The treasure place has been visited during the last four decades by at least four people, one of them a woman. Each brought away as many bits of the precious stuff as could be carried conveniently, and told of the great quantity that remains. Specimens of these nuggets are on exhibition, or were until very recently, in various mining museums in the West.

It is possible to be still more explicit as to the locality. From the gold-strewn hilltop, the smoke of the railroad trains can be seen as they pass near Salton station. To reach the spot, one can go west from

Yuma on the old Los Angeles Trail, which approximately follows the Mexican line, to a point near where it turns north. From this point the way lies a little to the eastward of Warner's Pass.

If the searcher is on the right road, the three peaks will loom before him. Let him climb the highest one, and if he finds beneath his feet pebbles and cobbles of dark gold, then he may know that he has found the lost Pegleg Mine, the search for which has cost as many lives as some battles, and suffering and disappointment beyond reckoning.

THE Pegleg is the greatest of all the mines which, having once disclosed their richness to man, have faded from his ken. It is in no sense a myth, like so many similar subjects of mining camp lore. There is an enormously rich deposit of gold somewhere in the fiery desolation of those southern mountains. Gold from it has passed across western merchants' counters; some of it has been molded into the coin of the country. . . . Its existence is proved by evidence that would be received in any court. But its history is a series of tragedies.

Most lost mines, real or chimerical, have a history of the same sort, particularly in that strange, sinister country of Southern California. There the deserts lie below the level of the sea, and the rotten crust of the earth lets the unwary traveler down into a lye strong enough to eat shoe leather; there the mountains pierce the sky, but have not enough soil on their slopes to sustain the hardiest of desert shrubs.

The Pegleg first came to the knowledge of men in the early 'Fifties. A one-legged pioneer roustabout named Bert Smith, bound from Yuma to Los Angeles, attempted a shortcut. He left the main trail, which winds its cautious way from waterhole to waterhole along the frontier

of Mexico and finally turns north, almost at a right angle, up by Warner's Pass.

Smith lost his bearings and climbed a hill to search the horizon for a landmark. The hill was curiously sprinkled with dark, heavy lumps of ore, which Smith did not recognize—people were not looking for gold in that country at the time. He took several fragments of convenient size to put with his snake rattles, arrow heads, and similar frontier curios, and went on to Los Angeles. Some years later he showed his collection to a man who knew gold. It was much darker than gold usually is, probably because of the presence of some natural alloy; but the Los Angelanos attributed the color to the gold's having been exposed to the sun, and the phrase "sun-burned gold" became engrafted on the language of the Western miners.

Pegleg Smith, never an intellectual giant, promptly went crazy on learning of his narrow escape from great wealth. Various people beset him during his lucid intervals, and to them he told all he could. Every man who thought he might find the place started out secretly to look for it, and for several years the hills between Warner's Pass and Yuma were full of them. The skeletons of these searchers were found scattered about for years afterward.

The search for Pegleg's find had pretty well subsided when a discharged soldier from old Fort Yuma came into San Bernardino with a lot of dark nuggets. He knew what they were, and was willing to tell where he had found them. He described the three peaks, and told how he had accidentally climbed the gold-crowned one. Then he went on a wild spree to celebrate his good luck, and he would not guide anybody to the place until he had spent all his gold.

Finally he started out with half a dozen companions, well equipped with pack-

horses and mule teams. Men not permitted to join the expedition trailed it far enough to learn that it did not go by Warner's Pass and Carriso Springs, which would have been the route had the soldier's account been a truthful one. But the trail was lost to the east of Warner's.

Five years later prospectors ran across the sun-bleached bones of men and animals in the foothills of the Cuyamaca Mountains, thirty miles southwest of Salton. According to one story, there were but two skeletons, but according to another, a third was found a few rods away with a bullet hole in the skull, mute evidence of a grim tragedy.

THE mine next caused excitement in the days when the railroad was being built. The line was being run north from Yuma, and the rails had been laid to what is now Salton station. Suddenly there appeared to the track layers a squaw from the Indian Reservation near the head of the Rio San Luis Rey. She fell exhausted as she came near, her tongue bursting from her mouth with thirst. They gave her water and revived her. . . . In a bandana, she had wrapped about two pounds of the dark gold, a sight of which was enough to set any community in Southern California in a frenzy.

She explained that she and her buck were traveling to the Cocopah Reservation, and that their canteen had leaked. In searching for a waterhole, they lost their way, and struck for high ground to look about. After two days' wandering, they found the gold on the top of one of three hills, from which they caught sight of the smoke of the construction engine. Her man, she said, had given out and died before they had gained the track.

The Indians of California have always known what gold is, and the squaw knew the value of her find. She would not point out the treasure peak or even indicate its

direction, and members of the section gang said they had seen her approaching the camp by various divergent paths. She had probably circled the camp, Indian fashion, before coming up to the workmen. On this slight clue, most of the construction hands quit work and started for the hills. . . . And the scattered graveyard of the Pegleg was further augmented.

The squaw went back to her own people, and was never identified, though many tried to find her.

The last trace of the Pegleg that Californians tell about is in connection with Ramon Ortega, a Mexican cowpuncher on Warner's ranch. After being absent without permission for several days, Ortega suddenly appeared with a quantity of the dark metal.

For a time, he was the most gorgeous rider in San Bernardino County. His saddle was a miracle of carved leather and silver trimmings, his sombrero weighed a pound and a half, so thickly was it encrusted with silver braid. This modern Don Juan rode the finest horse in the Southwest, played the limit in every monte and faro bank within range, and made love to all the girls who would listen to him.

Whenever his wealth ran low, he would

disappear for two or three days and return with more of the gold. A hundred men tried to trail him, but he took care to cover his tracks—and nobody ever learned where he went. Some time later, when he was cut to pieces in a knife duel, he had on deposit at Warner's four thousand dollars in nuggets and coarse gold. . . . But he left no word of its source.

As before, nearly everyone in the countryside started out to search again. Only one man, Tom Carver, a former sheriff, had anything like a clue. Once, while hunting horse thieves in the hills, he had met a Mexican rider, who may have been Ortega. With a trusted companion, Carver sought the Pegleg, starting from the place where he had met the dusky cowboy.

On one of his excursions, he left his friend in a buckboard on the desert, while he went up a little arroyo on foot. He never came back, nor was any trace of his body ever found.

The story of the Pegleg is, with few variations, the story of nearly all the lost mines in the southwest corner of the United States, which holds more of them than all the rest of the country combined—and where, siren-like the golden Lorelei still beckons to the unwary treasure-hunter.

NEXT MONTH:

DEATH DRIVES SHOTGUN GRADE

**Novelette of blood rivalry and heroic love and death
on the wild, open range of the Northwest frontier**

By WALT COBURN

AND a novel of the backtrail from outlawry

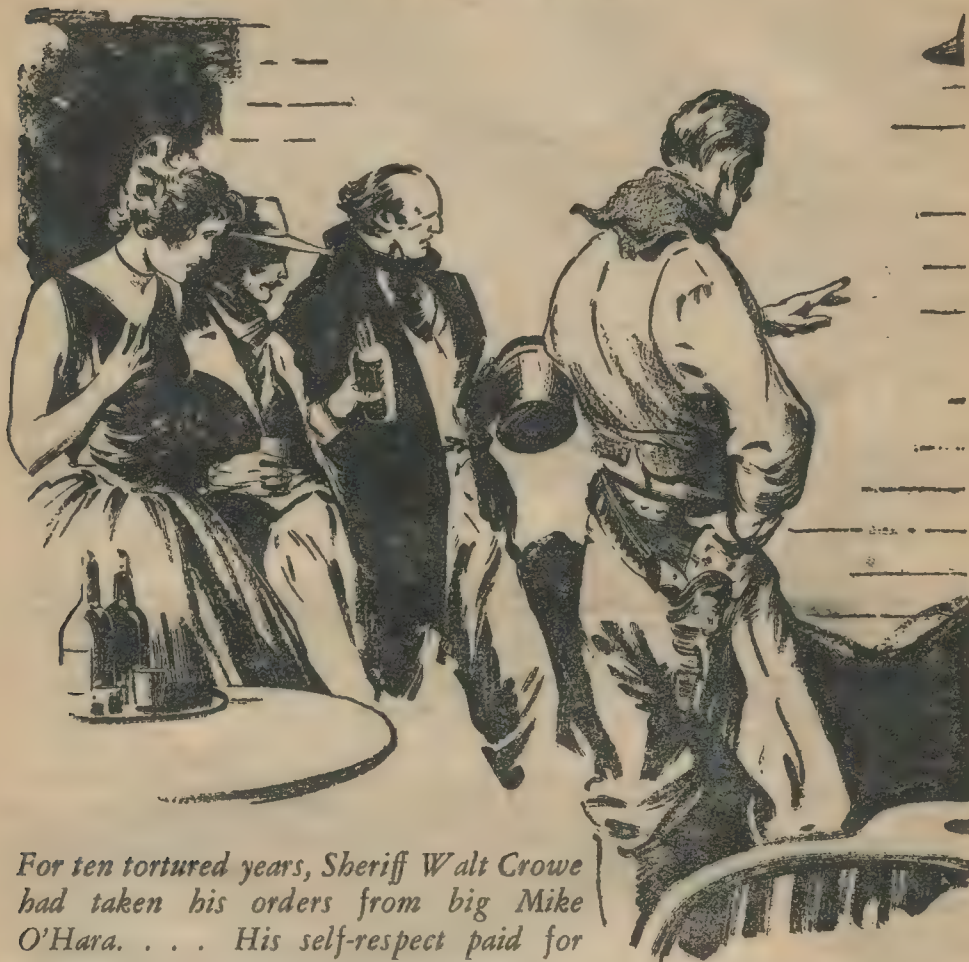
CALL FOR A GUN-PARTNER

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

Published May 7th!

TIN STAR TOWN-TAMER

By PETER DAWSON



For ten tortured years, Sheriff Walt Crowe had taken his orders from big Mike O'Hara. . . . His self-respect paid for silence on his outlaw past—till an ambush bullet and the rising thunder of a hangnoose mob lent him courage—to die for honor!

SEEING the way Mike O'Hara's square, loose figure so completely filled the chair by the window, Sheriff Walt Crowe grudgingly admitted that it would take quite a man to cross the big Irishman and make it stick. Thinking this, he toned down his words.

"I've got proof, Mike," he said.

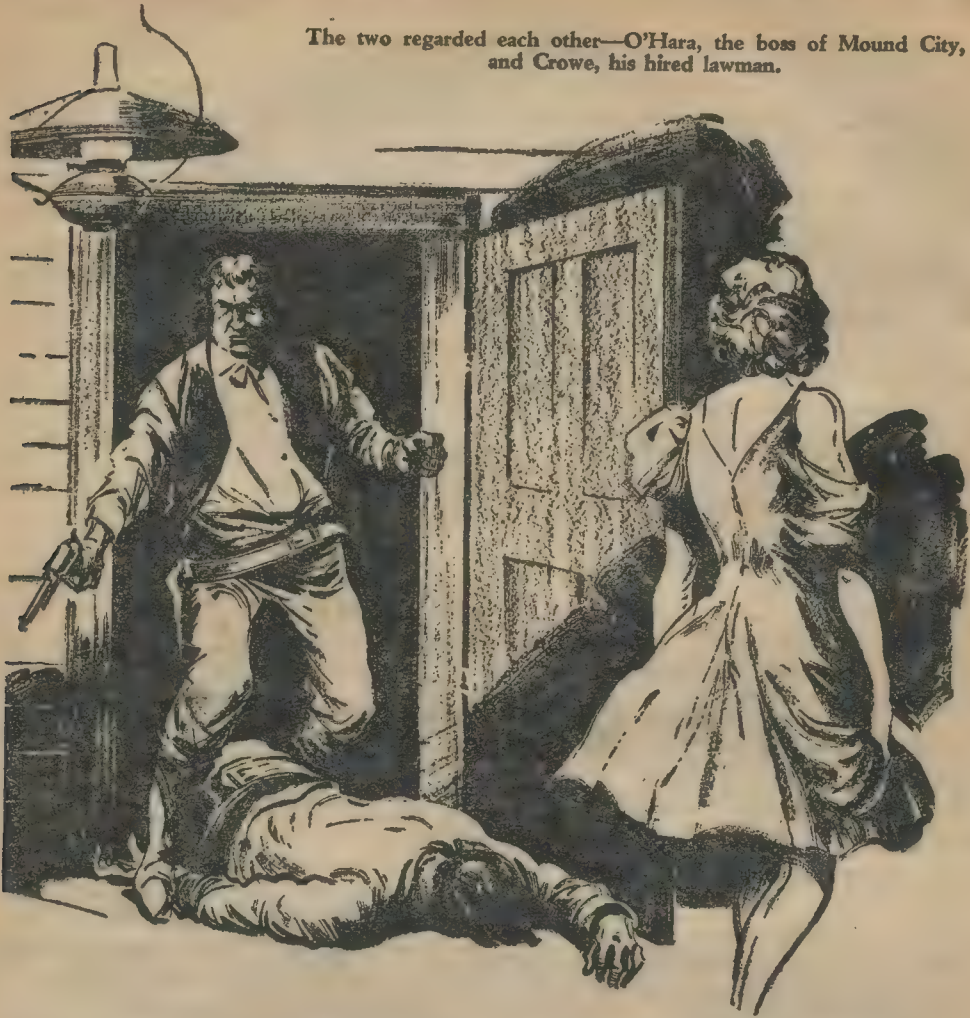
"You're wrong," O'Hara stated emphatically. As though the matter was settled, he shifted his gaze from the lawman's thin, mustached face, moved his

feet a little closer to the stove, and looked out of the jail-office window again.

For ten years Walt Crowe had used patience in his dealings with Mike O'Hara. He used it now in not speaking. Pushing his swivel chair back from the desk, he opened a drawer. He shoved back the nearly full pint bottle of whiskey that lay atop the litter of papers. After rummaging a moment, he found what he wanted and shut the drawer. He straightened up and tossed a crisp, new reward notice

A sweeping novelette of Old West courage in the face of dishonor and death!

The two regarded each other—O'Hara, the boss of Mound City, and Crowe, his hired lawman.



onto the far side of the desk, near O'Hara.
"Read it, Mike."

O'Hara turned from the window and, with obvious effort, brought his attention back to the matter at hand. He gave Crowe a long look before he thrust out a fat hand to pick up the paper and read what was written below the dim photograph in the center:

WANTED FOR MURDER: REWARD
\$3,000

FOUR FINGER CUMMINGS: Height 5' 7", hair blond, eyes gray, weight 155 lbs., index finger missing from right hand. On Feb. 17, 1884, shot and killed Roy Thurston, Marshal of Flat Butte, Wyo. Participated in stage robbery at Sundance, Wyo., late in

same year. Aliases Frank Camden, Idaho Cummings, Hal Caden. Address information to U. S. Marshal W. L. Trent, Flat Butte, Wyo.

DEAD OR ALIVE: Dangerous if armed.

O'Hara took a long time to read the notice, yet Crowe, knowing the man, was undisturbed. At length Mike's eyes raised from the sheet to regard the sheriff.

"That checks, don't it?" Crowe asked.

O'Hara sighed and bent forward in the chair. Without answering, he tore the paper in two, crumpled the two pieces and laid them on the desk. Next, he struck a match and touched the flame to the paper.

"Just a minute now, Mike. . . ."

O'Hara's upraised hand cut short the lawman's words. The big Irishman sat out the silence until the reward notice had burned to a gray ash, then smiled and said quietly: "Forget you ever saw this, Walt."

Anger, sudden and unreasoning, loosed itself within Crowe. He realized then, for the first time since he had known the man, that he hated O'Hara. For years he had taken luck as it ran, uncomplaining when he had to swallow his pride. O'Hara could ask him to do this; he had, in a way, a right to do it.

"That needs explainin', Mike," he drawled.

"Since when do I owe you any explanations, Crowe?"

The sheriff's face took on a slight flush, although his expression remained inscrutable. He was hating himself, asking why it was that he could never make the break that would, once and for all, end Mike O'Hara's domination over him. He felt a flash of his old confidence, and in that moment he knew he could kill O'Hara—that he was more than a match for the Irishman when it came to guns. But some cautious streak within him gave warning that this was not the time.

"I can't let you get away with everything, Mike," he said levelly. "Is there any good reason why I shouldn't go over to your place and arrest that gun-slick killer?"

"I hired him last night."

For the space of five long seconds Walt Crowe searched his mind to find the reason behind this move of O'Hara's. He gave it up finally.

"Three thousand is a lot, and I'm a poor man," he said. Then again, "It's no good letting a hard-case like Caden run loose in Mound City."

O'Hara straightened the string tie along his immaculate white shirt-front, regarding the law man with an unwinking stare.

At length he said pointedly: "Seems like I remember another reward notice. Could you be wantin' me to tack that up over in my place, Walt?"

Here it was. It was no surprise, even though Mike O'Hara had never mentioned it. Ten years ago it had been that old reward notice that had enabled O'Hara to recognize Crowe by another name—a man who had wearied of the law's pursuit. O'Hara had seen his chance and taken it; from then on, Walt Crowe was protected by the law, hiding behind a badge in O'Hara's town. By enforcing the law O'Hara's way, he had bought silence.

Now, once again, Mike was using the club he held over his lawman. Crowe asked himself just how this case differed from the dozen others that should have put O'Hara outside the law, deciding at length that it didn't. So it was that he gave his answer:

"Since you put it that way, Mike, I never heard of Caden."

IT WENT against everything in Crowe's makeup to force out those words. They took something from him, cheapened him in his own eyes. A subtle change rode through him, and gradually he felt the gnawing hunger for liquor—the hunger that had been with him constantly for months. He reached down and took the bottle out of the drawer. Lifting out the cork, he extended it to Mike O'Hara.

"Have a drink?"

O'Hara's wide lips came down in a half-sneer. Disgust mirrored itself on his pink, round face.

"Not now," he answered, and watched while Crowe tilted the bottle to his lips and took a long pull. He added, when the other was through, "Don't get any hay-wire ideas, Walt!"

The sheriff's gray eyes hardened a trifle. When he spoke, his words were

spaced evenly: "I wouldn't rub it in if I were you, Mike."

Pushing himself up out of the chair, O'Hara went to the door. There he hesitated, looking up the street.

Crowe got up and threw two rounds of wood into the stove and then went to the window. The expression on his face was one of weariness now that the other was not looking. His gaze followed O'Hara's. Up the deeply rutted street, coming toward them, was a buckboard flanked by two riders. The driver, a girl, wheeled in toward the hitchrack a few doors above the jail with the skilful abandon of one long familiar with the handling of the team.

A light of admiration crept into the sheriff's eyes as he watched the girl climb down from the seat and go to the rail to tie the team. She wore a split buckskin skirt and a heavy wool jacket. In the shadow beneath the wide-brimmed hat, her regular features took on an olive shade, and Crowe decided that he had never seen a finer face.

The two riders who had come in with the buckboard waved a casual farewell to her. They rode on past the jail and turned in at the hitchrack in front of the saloon across the street. The Golden Eagle was O'Hara's place, the most prosperous of the three the town boasted.

It was the rider half a head taller than the other who took Crowe's attention. He wore the faded blue denim trousers of the range, a dusty jacket against the chill of the winter day, and broad-brimmed, gray Stetson. Crowe noticed the economy of motion he used in getting out of the saddle and in rail-haltering his sorrel. As he crossed the walk he moved with a confident, swinging stride. As soon as the two had disappeared through the swing doors, the sheriff spoke aloud to O'Hara, who still stood in the door at his side:

"Looks like Stony Enders is what the Triangle R needed, don't it, Mike?"

Something in those words caused Mike O'Hara to turn slowly to face him. There was a look in his gray eyes that telegraphed a warning to Crowe.

"Just what the hell do you mean by that, Tin Star?"

A quick understanding came to the sheriff. The knowledge of it braced him.

"Just what I said, Mike. With Stony out there helpin' Jo and Ralph, it looks like they'd be able to pay you off that loan this spring."

With an expression grown out of twenty years at handling cards, O'Hara shrugged, masking his feelings once more: "I'd rather have the money than the spread," was all he said.

Whatever the danger had been, Crowe sensed that it had passed. He even wondered whether his first guess had been the right one. He could feel the whiskey taking hold of him now, and it gave him confidence. "Sometimes," he went on. "I figure it was a good thing when old Hap Redburn cashed in his chips and gave those two kids a chance to put the layout on its feet again. Whiskey and ranchin' don't mix, beyond a certain point, which is somethin' Hap could never figure out."

Purposely he was not looking at O'Hara as he spoke. If he had been, he would have caught the hard expression returning to the saloon owner's eyes. Here was something Crowe had been wanting to talk over with O'Hara for a long time; in fact, for eight months—ever since Hap Redburn's death and the discovery of the Triangle R's indebtedness.

The whiskey had mellowed Crowe, and he rambled on, paying no thought to the consequences: "It's a cinch young Ralph Redburn couldn't have managed it alone. He's different from his sister. If it weren't for Enders, they'd be losin' the outfit this spring."

He heard O'Hara's step beside him, but turned too late. The Irishman's ham-like fist gathered in Crowe's shirt-front and twisted it. Two of the buttons came off and fell onto the floor. Mike's face was close and his eyes were slitted.

"Get this, Crowe!" he growled hoarsely. "You aren't bein' paid to think. I don't want the Triangle R—never have wanted it!"

He shoved the lawman back against the desk, loosed his grip and turned suddenly back toward the door. There he paused, adding, "So long as your sentiments don't over-ride your good judgment, I don't give one damn what you think. You know how far you can go without steppin' on my toes, Crowe." He paused a moment, letting his words carry their full weight. "Only don't forget . . . I can build a noose for you any time I choose!"

THEN O'Hara was gone. Crowe's gaze, flint-like, followed his progress across the street and into the Golden Eagle. For the first time in his life he had let a man live after laying hands on him.

He found himself cursing savagely, uttering words that had not passed his lips for years. But gradually, and with a persistence that would not be denied, the things O'Hara had said about the Triangle R crowded his resentment into the background and left him with a growing curiosity.

Here was something he could not ignore. Thinking over the words that had brought that outburst from O'Hara, he remembered suddenly that day, eight months ago, that had seen him standing beside the bed of his dying friend, Hap Redburn. A hushed silence had hung over the room; once again, Redburn's words came back, startlingly clear:

"Walt, you're the only one I can leave Jo and Ralph with. Look after them for me. See if you can find Ralph and bring

him home. It's a damned shame Jo isn't a man, or she wouldn't need his help."

Two hours later Redburn was dead. It took three weeks for an advertisement of his father's death in a northern Montana paper to reach Ralph Redburn and bring him home. He brought with him Stony Enders, and it was Enders who had since supplied the driving energy that had lifted the Triangle R out from under Hap Redburn's legacy of debt. Fences were patched, water holes cleaned, and it was Enders himself who had warned off the thieving nesters and made the order stick.

And now, certain that he was seeing Jo and Ralph Redburn building a solid foundation for the future, Walt Crowe found that Mike O'Hara planned on owning the outfit. There was nothing beyond Mike's resentment to furnish him proof, yet it was obvious. It had been a bad day when Hap Redburn, his loan refused at the bank, had gone to Mike O'Hara and borrowed the money he needed. Already O'Hara owned three small ranches he had acquired in exactly this manner. The Triangle R would have made a rich prize for O'Hara's five thousand dollar investment.

Then Crowe remembered that less than a week ago Ralph Redburn had stopped in at the office. He had purposely mentioned the note to Crowe, telling him that the money would be in the bank in another thirty days.

"Then we can use the paper to light fires with, Walt," he had said.

Apparently there was nothing that could keep Jo and Ralph from meeting their obligation. Reassured, Crowe resumed his seat at the desk, thinking that now the time had come when he would have to do something about O'Hara. The old feeling of despondency returned; once again his hand dipped down to the drawer to bring out the bottle.

It took him half an hour to empty it. Five minutes later he hailed a boy passing the office, and sent him across to the Golden Eagle after a quart of Old Crow.

The afternoon dragged. Feeling the pleasant glow of the liquor, he forgot his troubles and began to think that, after all, he could have worse luck than working for Mike O'Hara. He dozed and did not wake until after sundown. The fire in the stove had gone out. He was cold and hungry.

Going down the street toward the lunchroom, he saw Enders and Redburn come out of the Golden Eagle. Ralph swayed drunkenly as he came across the walk, and Stony Enders had to help him into the saddle.

"Like his old man," Walt mused, allowing himself a silent chuckle. "The boys have been celebratin'."

He watched the two until they had ridden into the night's thick shadows up the street, then went on his way to his supper.

CHAPTER TWO

Murder At Dawn

INTO the chill dawn of the next morning rode Walt Crowe, the liquor of the night before setting up in him a half-nauseous, half-throbbing discomfort. Four o'clock was too early an hour to get even so much as a cup of coffee—but for that, he would not have minded this early ride.

Thinking of Flint McNeil's ugly face, he silently cursed the man. It was Flint, a Triangle R rider, who had telephoned half an hour ago that a Triangle R line shack had been burned during the night. Would Crowe come out right away and help them cut for sign and hunt the men who had done it?

Crowe had been too sleepy to catch the full meaning of the thing. The telephone

was new to him, and he seldom wasted more words than necessary in using it. But now that he was awake once again he regretted that he had not asked McNeil for more particulars.

Was Mike O'Hara taking this obvious way of striking at the Triangle R? Or had the nesters rebelled over being cut off so suddenly from the bounty that had been theirs during Hap Redburn's lifetime? Crowe shook his head, deciding that O'Hara would use no such tactics as this. Wholesale rustling would be more in O'Hara's line if he chose to ruin the outfit.

He gave up trying to find the answer to his questions and wrapped his leather coat tighter about him to shut out the penetrating chill. The trail ran table-flat over rock and sand, with here and there the patches of bunch-grass that made it possible to work the range. Occasional rock outcroppings thrust up out of the thin soil, taking on grotesque outlines in the half-light from the graying horizon ahead.

Six miles beyond town the trail made a wide swing around a massive outcropping that angled skyward toward the dimming stars. It was here that Crowe saw the thing that brought him suddenly alert. Against the lighter shadows of the up-tilted rock showed the outline of two saddled horses. Even before he was close enough to distinguish their brands, he recognized the thick-chested sorrel Stony Enders had ridden into town the day before.

The discovery turned him instantly wary. He rode a quick circle around the outcropping, bending low over his saddle so as to form a smaller target for the danger he was certain lurked there. But soon he straightened, seeing the two huddled figures lying at the base of a thick point of rock that thrust up skywards.

The light was strong enough now so that he could pick out the details. Stony Enders lay on his back, with arms spread-eagled while one outstretched hand was loosely closed over the butt of a .45. Crowe took all this in, then edged in closer to see the thing that sent his blood running cold.

The inhumanly sprawled position of Ralph Redburn's thin frame told him the man was dead. Even before he drew rein close enough to see the dark blood-stain across the back of the canvas coat, between the shoulders, he knew it.

THE ring of his chestnut's hoof on rock seemed to telegraph a warning to Stony Enders, for at that moment he stirred. Crowe sat his saddle, watching, his sixgun out now, while Enders rolled over and pushed himself up to a sitting position with obvious difficulty. He leaned forward, with his head pillowed in his hands as though in pain. At length he looked up, recognized the lawman, and glanced about him with a bewildered expression crossing his set features.

He stared at Crowe and asked in a thin voice: "How come?"

Walt Crowe shook his head, but made no answer, noting that Enders paid no attention to the weapon that had fallen from his hand when he sat up.

Stony looked over at Ralph. His lips twisted in an attempt at a smile. "If I could move, I'd crawl over and wake Ralph. But my head's splittin'. What happened, sheriff?"

"Take another look at Ralph," Crowe answered evenly, dismounting.

Enders looked again, and what he saw made him come hastily to his feet. He staggered over to look down at his friend. All at once he went down on his knees beside Ralph and gently rolled him over. A choked cry broke from his lips; he looked up at Crowe, a bitter grief written across features gone suddenly ashen.

"He's dead!"

Crowe stood watching until Stony was on his feet again.

"What do you know about this?" Stony asked, his voice brittle with emotion. "Who killed him?"

The lawman nodded toward the Colt that lay on the ground where Enders had dropped it. Stony walked over to it, moving a little unsteadily. His hand dropped to feel of his empty holster, and Crowe caught the quick flicker of astonishment that dilated his eyes.

When Enders spoke, his voice was hushed: "Did I do it?"

Walt Crowe made his decision quickly, knowing he could not be wrong.

"No," he answered, shaking his head. "But I reckon the man who did wanted me to think it was you."

Stony sat down again, holding his head with both hands. "I didn't drink enough last night to make me feel this way."

The sheriff's face was seamed in a deep frown. "Maybe you ought to tell me what happened."

Stony's eyes came suddenly alight. "It was the last drink Mike gave us. That was it, Walt!" He was on his feet again, standing close to the lawman, a subtle fury turning his dark face into an ugly grimace. "I knew it tasted damned funny! And Mike said it was his own private bottle—one on the house! Hell, Walt, I didn't have more'n five drinks—just enough to go along with Ralph and keep him company while he got a skin full."

Walt nodded. "Ralph was drunk?"

"Just like he always was when he hit the bottle," Stony told him. "I've kept him away from it for weeks now. But yesterday we were celebratin'—" He paused, left the sentence unfinished.

"Celebratin' what?"

"It was nothin'," Stony said, his glance shifting. "Ralph figured we ought to have a few drinks, though, seein' that Jo and I are goin' to be married soon."

So that was it! Walt Crowe could even now feel a little proud of Jo Redburn and the choice she had made. He had liked Enders from the very moment he had met him. Once it had occurred to him that the man would make a fine husband for Jo, but he had been so out of touch with things at the Triangle R that he had little realization of what had been going on out there.

He heard himself saying: "She's a fine girl, Stony. This is goin' to be hard on her." His thoughts were a jumble, yet he gradually caught the implication Ralph Redburn's death would leave. He voiced the thought: "With Ralph out of the way and you marryin' Jo, it looks like you've got yourself a ranch, Stony."

He put the statement bluntly, and waited to see the results. They were not long in coming. A look of disbelief crossed Stony Enders' face, to be followed by one of incredible fury . . . All at once Stony lunged!

Had it not been for Stony's stiffened muscles, Walt Crowe could not have evaded the blow. As it was, it caught him on the shoulder, throwing him back a step. Enders fell against him and would have gone down if Crowe had not reached out to take him roughly by the arm.

Stony straightened up, jerking his arm away. He flashed a glance back to where his gun lay in the sand—and took a step toward it.

Crowe stopped him. "Easy, Stony! No sense in goin' hog-wild! I'm just tellin' you what people will think. I know different."

ENDERS gave the lawman a steady glance. At length he mumbled: "For a minute I wondered about you, Walt." He rubbed his palm along his forehead, closing his eyes in pain.

"What about that drink Mike O'Hara gave you last night?" Crowe asked,

knowing the torture that Enders was experiencing. "Did it taste bitter?"

"Bitter as gall."

"Why did you drink it?"

"Ralph had just told Mike he'd be able to pay off the note. Mike was settin' us up. I had to take it."

"Ralph, too?"

Stony nodded. "It finished Ralph. A half mile out o' town he folded up. I had to lay him across the saddle. Things aren't very clear after that. I remember ridin', tryin' to sit up straight. That's all."

Crowe walked over to pick up Stony's .45. He sniffed at the blunt snout of the weapon, then threw open the loading gate and shucked out the shells. He held out his hand and showed Stony. There were two empties.

"That tallies," he said. "Ralph was shot only once. You carry an empty under the hammer?"

Stony nodded. "But, Walt, I don't remember—"

"I know you don't," Crowe answered. "It takes a real man to handle knockout drops and still hang onto his senses. Did you pour your own drink?"

"No. O'Hara took the bottle out of a cupboard behind the bar and poured them himself."

The sheriff snorted his disgust. "I'd think you'd know better."

Enders had no comment to make. He stood there, staring blankly at Ralph's still form, with a look that brought Walt Crowe abruptly out of his ill humor.

"You're goin' to jail, Stony."

"Jail?" Enders was slow to comprehend. "But I didn't do it, Walt! Give me my iron and I'll hunt the whippoowill who did!"

Crowe shook his head soberly, repeating, "You're goin' to jail. Whoever did this, figured I'd take you there. Flint McNeil called in this mornin' to tell me your line shack up Three Way Gulch burned

last night. I was meant to ride out here and find you."

"Then I've been framed?"

"Good and proper!"

There was a glitter in Stony's eyes as he looked over once more at Ralph's body. Crowe knew what was going on in the man's mind.

"It won't do to make a break for Ralph's sixgun," he said. "You could grab it and throw down on me and maybe get away. But that wouldn't help any! What'd happen to Jo?"

The words had their effect. Enders' shoulders drooped, all the life going out of him.

"You see?" Crowe went on. "Someone wanted mighty bad to have you and Ralph out of the way. If you run, the law will be after you. You'd better stay and wait 'til things clear up a bit."

"How can they, with me in jail?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. But it looks to me like Mike O'Hara would bear watchin'. Did you see this man Caden last night?"

"Caden?" Stony shook his head. "Who's he?"

"Little fellow with yellow hair. He carries his guns tied low."

"Oh, him!" Stony's look changed to one of understanding. "He was around most of the afternoon. Sat in at a poker game and left half an hour or so before we did. I saw him go out."

Crowe mused, "It couldn't have been anyone else." For a moment he was silent, then added: "You pack Ralph into his saddle. I'm havin' a look around."

It took him five minutes to go over the ground around the outcropping. When he came back, Stony had slung Ralph's body across the saddle and tied it so that it would not slip off.

"There's no sign," Crowe said. "Let's ride."

The ride back to Mound City was a

silent one. The red ball of the sun thrust up over the horizon, throwing quarter-mile shadows out ahead of them along the trail. A mile out of town Crowe reined in beside Enders. He brought out a pair of handcuffs from a back pocket.

"You'd better wear these. It'll look a little more convincin'."

Stony gave him a look of distrust. "What's to stop you from carryin' out Mike O'Hara's play, Crowe? You're his man!"

CHAPTER THREE

Lynch-Town Lawman

THE bluntly accusing words hit the sheriff between the eyes. He held back the stinging reply that first came to his lips, knowing that Stony Enders could have no reason for trust in him. To Stony he was nothing but a lawman who spent most of his time over a bottle.

He replied simply. "I was Hap Redburn's best friend, Enders."

Stony hesitated, and Crowe wondered what was going on in his mind.

At last Enders said: "Ralph trusted you, and so does Jo. I reckon I spoke out of turn, Walt!" He held out his hands.

Ten minutes later the two rode into town, directly to the jail. The half dozen people they passed on the street spread the news quickly, and, by the time Enders was locked into one of the four cells, a crowd gathered in front.

Crowe took Ralph's body down to the hardware store, where Ed Kennedy put it in his back storeroom to await burial. Next he went to the hotel, and put through a call to the Triangle R. It was a party line, and he knew there would be listeners. So he did not ask to speak to Jo, but gave his message to Flint McNeil, who had been waiting for him at the house.

That disagreeable task completed, he walked quickly down to the jail, dis-

persed the curious crowd that had gathered, and sent a boy over to the restaurant for two breakfasts. The office was cold, so he built a fire in the stove.

Stony was not hungry, but Crowe forced him to eat.

"You'll need all the food you can cram in you," the sheriff said. "And sleep, too. Now leave everything to me. Don't let anything you hear outside get you riled up. It'll be night before anyone tries to get in here. And, by then, I hope you'll be out."

Stony was not slow to comprehend the meaning behind the sheriff's words. "You mean—you mean there'll be a mob?"

Crowe nodded. "I'd bet money on it. But nothin' can happen until after dark. The word's already spreadin' to gather up a necktie party."

What he said was true. He had heard of it at the hotel, and only then was he sure he was progressing along the right lines. No man but Mike O'Hara would have started that kind of talk with so little to back it up. Crowe himself had told no one any details of Enders' arrest. Ed Kennedy, at the hardware store, could be depended on to keep what he knew to himself.

Stony took in the lawman's words as though he had half expected them. After a minute he asked, "Does Jo know?"

"I called up and told Flint McNeil. She'll be in this afternoon."

He went out of the cellblock then, took down the doublebarreled shotgun from the wall and broke it open. He loaded the gun and lay it across his desk.

By noontime the single street of Mound City was alive with buckboards, spring wagons and horses. The Golden Eagle was doing a thriving business. Crowe could see three of O'Hara's men—Wade Sanderson, Al Hardy and Ben Nilsen—mixing unobtrusively with those who came and went, picking their men and pausing

to talk with them. It was obvious to the sheriff that they were stirring up the crowd with lynch talk. Yet he was certain he could not be wrong—it would not happen until night.

SEVERAL times Crowe felt a gnawing hunger for liquor, but each time he put it down. He knew that he would need a clear head.

Shortly after two o'clock, Crowe spotted Fred Benson, owner of the Skillet outfit, coming down the street. Of all the people Walt Crowe knew about Mound City, this man was the one he could trust beyond question. Crowe had been hoping Benson would show up.

Benson stopped just outside the door, saying, "There's talk of a lynchin', Walt. Al Hardy across the street tells it that you found Enders out by Six Mile Rocks. Redburn had a hole through his back—and Enders' .45 had been fired."

"Uh-huh," Crowe drawled. "And where did Hardy get all this?"

"He didn't say."

"Fred, I haven't told a soul where or how I found Enders and Ralph Redburn. We didn't meet anyone on the trail—and no one saw us . . . Figure it out for yourself."

Fred Benson's face underwent a slow change. When he spoke, the tone of his voice was a little lower than usual and he put his words deliberately: "I never knew you to lie, Crowe. Who framed him?"

The sheriff shook his head. "I'm keepin' my guesses to myself."

"Enders won't live to come to trial. A lot of folks are talkin' up rope and limb trial tonight. You'd better get busy."

"I aim to—with your help."

Benson answered, "I'm in on it. What can I do?"

Crowe handed the shotgun to him. "Don't let anyone in here while I'm gone."

It'll take me about half an hour to do what I want."

"Mind tellin' me what it is?"

"Don't know yet," Crowe said hurriedly. "After I get back, I want you to get three or four of your men and throw around this jail without anyone knowin' it. Tell 'em to stay under cover, but to keep their eyes open. I don't think they'll be needed, but I'm not takin' chances."

As he finished, he pulled open the desk drawer and lifted out the bottle he had left there the night before. He took a swallow of the whiskey without offering any to Benson, then poured a little in his palm and smeared it on his shirt.

Benson, incredulous, watched him. "What the hell is this, Walt?"

"I'm stagin' a drunk," Crowe told him, and went out the front door and onto the street. Behind him trailed the aroma of whiskey.

CCROSSING the street, Walt Crowe weaved a little in his spraddled stride. He wore no coat, but nevertheless walked loosely even though the chill air made him shiver. He edged through the crowd at the door of the Golden Eagle, looking with a flat, vacant stare at those who spoke to him. Once through the swing doors, he went directly to the bar, noting that the men in the room made way for him. At the bar he ordered a double shot of whiskey with a small beer chaser.

Lifting the brimming glass to his lips, he spilled a little onto his leather cuff, but made no move to wipe it off. Nodding to the door at the end of the bar, he said to the bartender, "Mike in?"

"Busy."

He paid no attention to the barkeep's reply. He shoved the man standing alongside him out of his way, and walked uncertainly to the door of Mike O'Hara's office. He did not knock before opening the door.

Hal Caden came out of his chair in front of O'Hara's desk, and his hand dropped to the sixgun at his thigh. O'Hara held out his hand to stop him, looking with undisguised displeasure at the sheriff.

"I'm after orders, Mike."

He had closed the door behind him. Now the noise from the barroom was shut out, leaving a tense, strained silence.

O'Hara's thick brows contracted in a frown. At a nod from him, Caden gave the sheriff a last cursory glance and left the room. Crowe sat down.

"Orders?" Mike queried.

"Enders is locked up. What am I to do with him?" Crowe's words were slurred, and he winked significantly.

O'Hara said, "Been hittin' the bottle again, Walt? You're drunk."

Crowe straightened up with a show of indignation. "Drunk? Gawdamighty, Mike! Can't a man have a drink or two without bein' drunk? I ain't never been drunk, 'specially with a pris'ner to guard." He paused a moment to lean forward over the desk, then whispered. "Am I to stay out o' the way, Mike?"

"You get over across the street and keep a guard on that jail!" O'Hara growled. Then a slow smile crossed his coarse features. "If the crowd gets rough tonight," he drawled, "don't throw any lead into it, Walt. You might hurt a few of the boys."

Crowe screwed his face up into another obvious wink, nodded knowingly, and got up out of the chair. "Mind if I take one on the way out?"

"Help yourself," Mike answered, relaxing, affable once more.

The sheriff went through the door and closed it behind him. It was a full minute before Hal Caden re-entered. When he had come in and closed the door, he caught the pleased smile on Mike O'Hara's face.

"Any news?" he asked.

O'Hara chuckled, "Forget the sheriff, Caden. He's with us."

Outside, at the bar, Walt Crowe lingered for a good twenty minutes. During that time he downed six drinks of straight whiskey. O'Hara's man behind the bar exchanged several knowing smiles with his customers and shook his head solemnly as Crowe left, weaving slightly and staring ahead with unseeing eyes.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bait for A Killer

JO REDBURN came to the jail shortly after Fred Benson had left to round up his riders. Her eyes were moist with tears. Crowe knew that she had just come from the hardware store.

"Can I see Stony?" she asked.

He shook his head soberly. "He'll be out of here sometime tonight. He'll ride out to see you. Wait until then."

Apprehension filled her look, but before she could speak Crowe went on, "They're not goin' to break him out. I'm turnin' him loose."

"Then he didn't do it!" Jo gasped, an inner hope lighting her eyes.

"Why are you askin' me that, Jo?" Crowe said gruffly. "You know he didn't."

She put her hands to her face then, and stood there sobbing quietly. The lawman crossed over to her, tilted her chin up.

"It's bad about Ralph, Jo," he said. "I'm sorry. You run along now and get on home. Take your outfit with you. I don't want them tanglin' in here tonight."

She asked him once again what he was planning to do, but he wouldn't tell her. When she had gone, he fortified himself with another drink, and again took his place at the door. The long shadows of the setting sun were fading to a quick

settling dusk. He sent across the street to the restaurant for Stony's supper, watched silently while his prisoner devoured the meal.

Stony was feeling better. He tried to talk to Crowe. But he soon gave up. Crowe felt no need of food for himself.

The lights had come on in the store windows when he went back into the office. He lighted his lamp and the lantern in the cell block, pulled down the shade, and went to his desk. In the drawer he found three reward posters with Caden's picture on them, mates to the one O'Hara had burned. He laid one on his desk, then turned the chair to work the combination of the small safe behind him. He left the safe door open after he had taken out a folded sheet of paper from a small drawer inside.

This second sheet was crumpled and dog-eared. He spread it flat on the desk and examined the writing on it. It was a note in Mike O'Hara's hand, a three-line message he had received months ago from the owner of the Golden Eagle.

He took the stub of a pencil from his shirt pocket, turned the reward notice face down, and began to write on the back of it.

It was laborious work to copy O'Hara's full rounded style. He formed the letters lightly at first, then went over them again. Once he bent down and rubbed his hand along the dusty floor, then wiped a smudge across what he had written. After ten minutes he was satisfied with what he had done. Folding the reward notice and putting it in his pocket, he replaced O'Hara's note in the safe, leaving its door open.

A ring of keys hung on a small nail behind the stove. Crowe took them down. Selecting one, he put it in his right boot.

His next job took him longer. Removing the cartridges from his .45, he pried the lead out of the cases of all five.

It was trying work to replace the slugs again and make them fit, after he had emptied the powder from each shell. At last he finished, reloaded and dropped the gun back into his holster. He threw the little mound of powder into the wood box, gave one look at the safe, standing open behind his desk, and then blew out the lamp and went out onto the street.

It took him ten minutes to find Fred Benson. When he did, he told him, "Fred, I've got a job for you. Get one of your men and come along down to the office."

Benson went across the street to the stable. In a minute he came out with Grant Schuler, his foreman. They arrived at the still dark office two minutes after Crowe had returned.

The sheriff took them inside and through into the cell block without lighting the office lamp. Without a word, he led them to the end cell and unlocked the door. The light of the lantern hanging just inside the door to the office left this end cell in deep shadow.

"Fred, you and Grant go in there and set until I come back. It may be a half hour, maybe longer. Keep your ears unbuttoned, and don't spoil my play—no matter what happens." He stepped out until he could look into the cell nearest the office, where Stony Enders now stood, watching them. "The same goes for you, Stony. All of you act like you aren't even here."

"What the hell?"

"I don't know yet, Fred," Crowe cut in on Benson's puzzled query. "Only, remember—keep quiet, no matter what happens."

Crowe swung the door shut on them, but he did not lock it. Next, he went into his office, ran up the window shade. He brought his chair over to the window, and sat down. He sat there for twenty minutes, looking across the street, until he

saw Hal Caden come out of the Golden Eagle and shoulder his way through the crowd. The sheriff then left the office, crossing the street up ahead of Caden.

He was waiting at the lunch counter doorway as Caden came along the walk. He stepped out in front of him.

"Have you got a minute before you feed, Caden?"

"Sure," the other answered. "What'll you have?"

The sheriff nodded toward his office. "Follow me over to the office in a minute. It's important."

He moved on before the little gunman could make an answer. Crossing the street, he wanted to hurry, but forced himself to keep a slow, none-too-steady stride. He entered the office, lighted the lamp, and drew down the blind.

Caden came in half a minute later, his shifty, gray eyes flashing a look about the small room, finally settling on the sheriff.

"Be with you in a minute," Crowe said, and lifted the lid off the sheet-iron stove. He bent down over the wood box, his right side turned away from Caden. When he straightened up again his .45 rested in his palm.

"Reach, Four Finger!"

Caden's instinctive outward sweep of the hands was the first motion of a draw that suddenly terminated. For Walt Crowe's sixgun nosed up and centered on his shirt front. The gunie's hands went up, and his face took on a sneer.

"What's your play, Crowe?"

"You'll find out after you shed your hardware and pick yourself a cell! Shed it."

Caden hesitated, trying to understand. Then he reached down and unbuckled his belt, letting it slip down off his thighs and onto the floor. Crowe stepped forward and kicked the gun out of Caden's reach. Then he picked it up and put it in the safe at the back end of the office.

He shut the safe door, and spun the combination.

Finished with that, Crowe jerked his head toward the cell block door that stood open at the rear of the room. Caden went through it, and Crowe put him in the cell alongside Stony Enders.

As the door swung shut and the key grated in the lock, Caden turned, grasping the bars.

"Wait'll Mike hears about this!" he snarled.

Crowe smiled broadly, reached into his pocket and brought out the reward notice. He handed it to Caden through the bars.

"Mike plays a pretty smart game," he said. "He sent that over an hour ago. For a hard-case, you're the easiest arrest I ever made."

Caden unfolded the sheet, smiling thinly as he looked at the face of it.

"I've seen this before. So's Mike."

"Turn it over."

Caden read:

CROWE. ARREST CADEN FOR REDBURN MURDER. LEAVE THE REST TO ME. O'HARA.

CADEN'S face took on a sickly pallor. "Let me out and give me my plow-handle, Crowe!" he grated. "I'll kill that sidewinder!"

Crowe laughed easily and shook his head. "Three thousand is as much as I make in three years, Caden." He leaned idly against the bars of the cell door, less than four feet from the stoop-shouldered little gunman, looking beyond and into the shadows where Fred Benson and Grant Schuler listened.

The look in Caden's eyes changed as he took in what the sheriff had done. His gray eyes hid his expression the next instant.

"You reckon Mike figures to take care of me tonight when he sends his mob over after Enders?"

Crowe shrugged. "That's how I figure it. You know too much."

Caden permitted himself a snort of disgust. "Mike should know. He paid me plenty for the job."

"I figured it was that way," Crowe drawled. "Well, guess I'll go out and set by the stove."

He turned and took one step away from the cell door before he felt the tug at his waist. He whirled in time to see Caden's hand dart back inside the bars again, holding his sixgun. With a leering grin, Caden raised the weapon and lined it at him.

"It's my turn now, Tin Star. Back up here! Make a move and I'll spill that whiskey out o' your guts!"

Crowe swallowed thickly and said, "I was only doin' my duty, Caden! Don't forget that." He stepped in toward the door as he spoke. Caden reached through and lifted the keys off the ring at his belt.

"I never did play for a nickel pot, lawman. I'm after O'Hara."

He was busy at the lock now. Abruptly they heard Stony Enders speaking:

"It was you who killed Ralph Redburn, Caden?"

Caden paused a minute, looking through the grating at Enders. "The job was worth a thousand in gold. Mike made it easy."

"When I get out, I'm coming after you!" Stony said, his voice brittle.

Caden had the door unlocked then, had pushed it open. His smile was wicked as he backed away, motioning Crowe to take his place in the cell. When he had locked the door and thrown the keys over against the far wall, he laughed quietly, "You won't follow anyone from where you're goin'," he told Enders.

Then he disappeared.

(Continued on page 122)



TRAIL'S END

"NO MAN'S licked," said Pete Vernon, measuring his words as his swollen, bloodshot eyes swept the circle of cowpunchers squatting around the roundup camp mess tent, "till he's dead and buried." And his narrowed, slitted eyes glinted through puffed and discolored flesh, resting on Brush Davison, the Circle C rep.

Any man who knew Pete Vernon, and most of the Cross N men knew him plenty well, could have told Brush Davison that Pete's warning was more than mere talk. Davison had whipped Pete Vernon the night before, in a terrific but brief rough-and-tumble fight over a frightened girl at a Sagebrush dancehall. The fight between them was not finished, never would be finished until one or both of them was dead; any man who knew Pete Vernon could have told Davison that.

But the Circle C rep, though a stranger among the Cross N cowpunchers, was old enough to do his own guessing. And he met Pete Vernon's venomous stare with a faint grin and a nod of his head.

Then the Cross N boss' loud and profane summons broke up the crowd in the mess tent. They clattered empty cups and plates into the big dishpan on the roundup stove and went to catch their horses. They were all a little woozy from too much

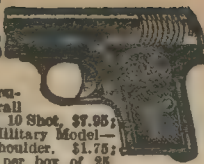
Sagebrush forty-rod whiskey. Some were good-natured, others touchy and quarrelsome. But none of them failed to remember later the bits of war talk they had listened to in the mess tent that evening.

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TEN STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 119)

CHAPTER FIVE

Town-Tamer's Law

"WALT, I've got him in my sights through this window," came Fred Benson's voice. "Shall I let him have it?"

"Don't," Crowe shouted. He heard Benson climb down off the cot.

"That was part of it?" Benson asked, pushing open the door to his own cell.

Crowe was sitting in the other cell, pulling off his boot. "It was," he said. When he had retrieved the key, and his boot was back on again, he reached through, unlocked the door and stepped out beside them.

"What d'you aim to do, Walt?"

"You wait here a minute," Crowe said, going out into the office and bending over the safe. He worked the combination and had the safe open in a few seconds. He took out Caden's sixgun, thrust it in his holster and went out the door.

The crowd in front of the swing doors at the Golden Eagle gave way before Crowe as he stepped up onto the walk. The men there had never before seen the look that was on their sheriff's face now.

The barroom was full, but at the back Crowe spotted Caden making his way toward the door of Mike O'Hara's office.

Leaving the door open, Caden stepped into the room and out of the sheriff's sight. Crowe heard their voices, O'Hara's and Caden's, and saw O'Hara get up from his desk and stride toward the door, reaching out to shut it.

Suddenly Mike paused. His lips came down in an ugly grimace, and he took a step back, forgetting now about the door. The next instant the big Irishman's hand was streaking for the sixgun at his thigh.

He moved with lightning quickness. The gun settled at his hip and lanced fire. The gun-blast beat through the room, to bring it to a sudden silence.

(Continued on page 124)

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TEN STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 122)

All at once Caden staggered out into sight again, one claw-like hand clutching the spreading red splotch at his chest. In his other he held Walt Crowe's loadless .45.

As the sheriff watched, he saw the little gunie cast one brief glance down at his useless gun before his eyes smeared over. Caden fell out through the door, sprawling lifelessly.

O'Hara stepped over the gunman's body, holstering his Colt. He looked over toward the bar, signaling the man behind it.

"Cart this little sidewinder out o' here," he said crisply. Then his glance took in Walt Crowe's presence, and he added: "Never mind, Charlie."

THE two regarded each other for the space of a full second—O'Hara, the boss of Mound City, and Crowe, his hired lawman. But Mike O'Hara now saw at a glance that Crowe was changed, that he was no longer the drunken, weak-willed individual who had carried out his orders unquestioningly for ten years.

He hastened to speak. "Come into the office, Crowe."

"This'll do," Walt answered. "Mike, I'm arrestin' you for the murder of Ralph Redburn."

O'Hara's face flushed. His glance hardened. He jerked his head, to indicate Hal Caden's lifeless form on the floor. "There's your man, Crowe. Caden killed Redburn."

Crowe shook his head. "It won't work, Mike. I have two witnesses who heard Caden confess you paid him a thousand in gold to beef Redburn. Shed your hardware, Mike. You're under arrest."

The sheriff's words brought an angry murmur from the crowd.

Crowe saw the killing light that came then into Mike O'Hara's eyes. He knew

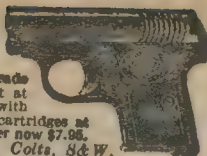
(Continued on page 126)

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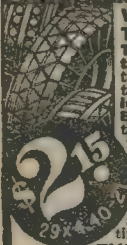
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TEN STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 124)

what Mike was thinking of—the old reward notice. If he killed Crowe, it would be all that was necessary to back his play.

O'Hara's casual glance went slowly over those in the smoke-fogged room. Yet Crowe saw his hand move before the eyes swung back again. His own hand swept up, feeling the cold slap of Caden's gun against his palm. The weapon lifted like a thing alive, in perfect balance.

Crowe thrilled to the lightness of the hammer's pull. The gun roared before he expected it, so light was the trigger. Mike O'Hara's huge bulk jerked as the lead caught him in the chest, yet his gun swept on up. The tremendous vitality of this man was hanging grimly on—to send that one shot that would wipe out Walt Crowe.

The sheriff saw. Wildly he thumbed the hammer. He emptied the sixgun in a drumming trip-hammer series of blasts that became a prolonged roar in the confinement of the room. His second shot shattered Mike's wrist and tore the weapon from his hand. The third and fourth and fifth went after the first, close-grouped in the center of that broad expanse of white shirt front.

A smile crossed Mike O'Hara's face as life went out of him. Only Walt Crowe knew the meaning of that smile. Then Mike was falling, gone suddenly loose as the driving energy waned.

Crowe faced about, in time to see Fred Benson, Grant Schuler and Stony Enders pushing their way toward him. He waited until Benson stood beside him.

"Fred, clean up this mess. I have a little job to do."

He went on back into Mike O'Hara's office, closing the door and locking it. He noted that the window shade was drawn before he commenced his search. It took him thirty minutes to find it, thirty minutes in which he disregarded the knocking

TIN STAR TOWN-TAMER

at the door. When he finally found that reward notice, wedged in the under side of the bottom drawer, he pulled it loose and touched a match to it. After the last glowing ash had winked out, he crumbled it down into O'Hara's ash tray and went over to open the door.

Stony Enders and Fred Benson were standing outside. On the floor at their feet was a wet spot ringing a darker one, where someone had tried to mop up Mike O'Hara's blood.

Crowe regarded Stony severely. "Why are you hangin' 'round?"

"I thought you might need some help, Walt."

"Help, hell! I've helped myself tonight. I told Jo you'd be ridin' out to see her." He paused a moment, smiling at the light that came into Stony Enders' eyes, then added gruffly, "Well? . . . What're you waitin' on?"

THE END



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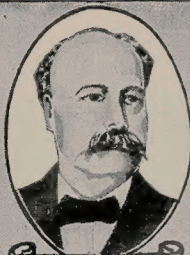
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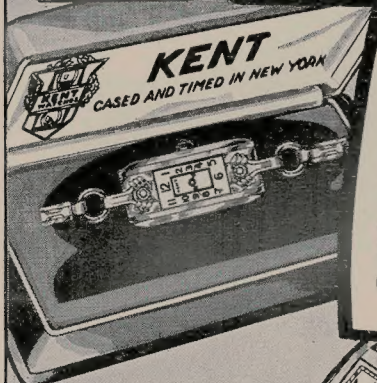
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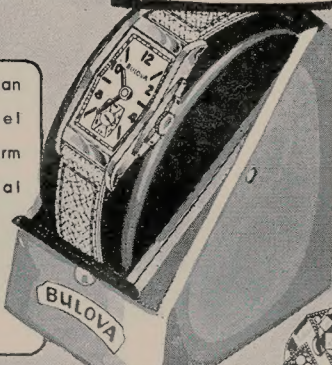
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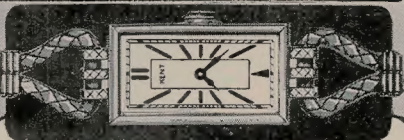
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